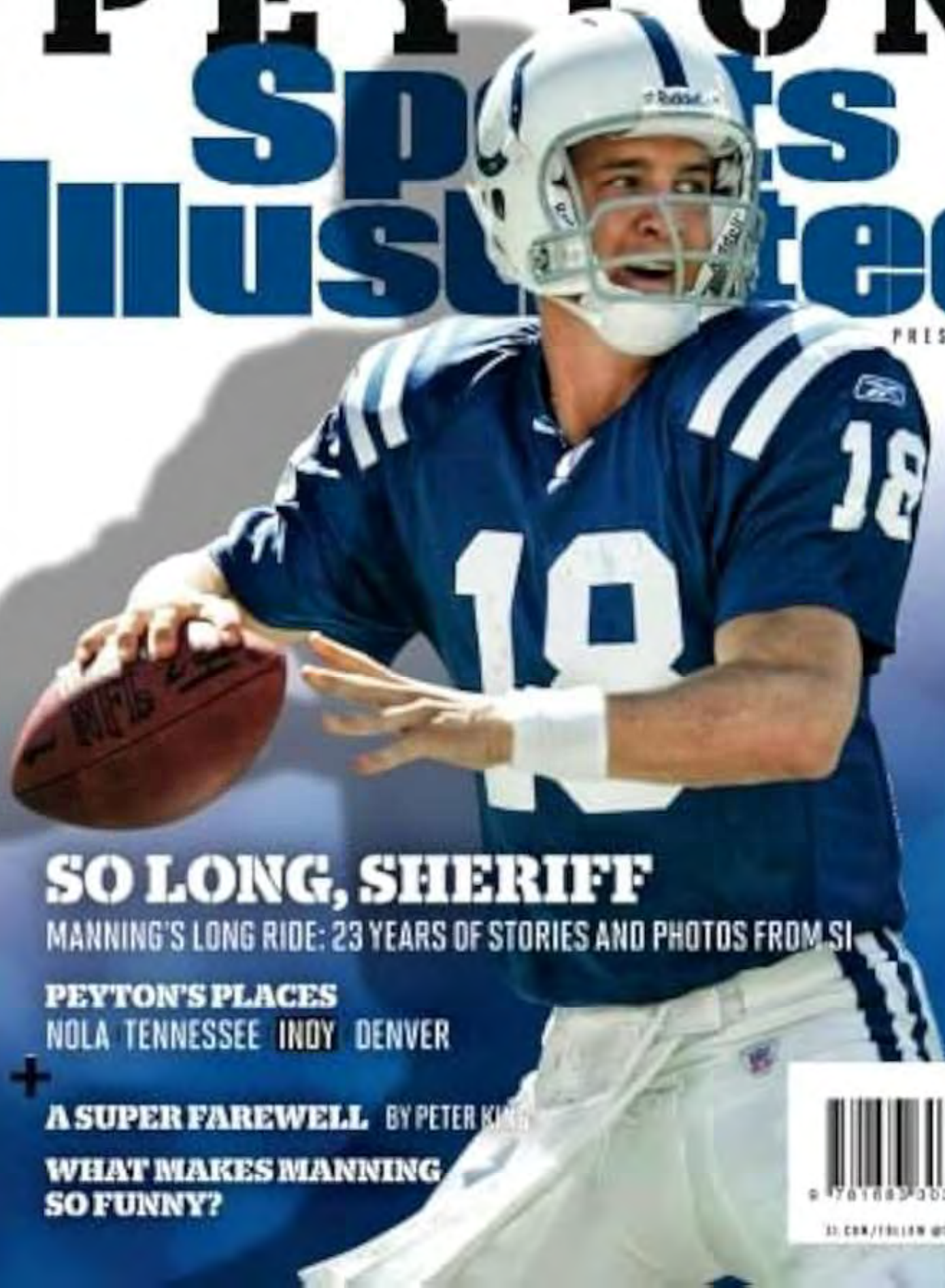


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PEYTON Sports Illustrated

PRESENTS



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PEYTON'S PLACES

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A SUPER FAREWELL BY PETER KING

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THREE REGIONAL COVERS**

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PETER READ MILLER
For Sports Illustrated

COLTS
Photograph by
BOB ROSATO
For Sports Illustrated

BRONCOS
Photograph by
DAVID E. KLUTHO
For Sports Illustrated

LIGHT OF PEY
Over 18 NFL seasons Manning cast a long shadow—breaking records, winning two Super Bowls and becoming the paradigm of the star quarterback on and off the field.

Sports Illustrated Presents

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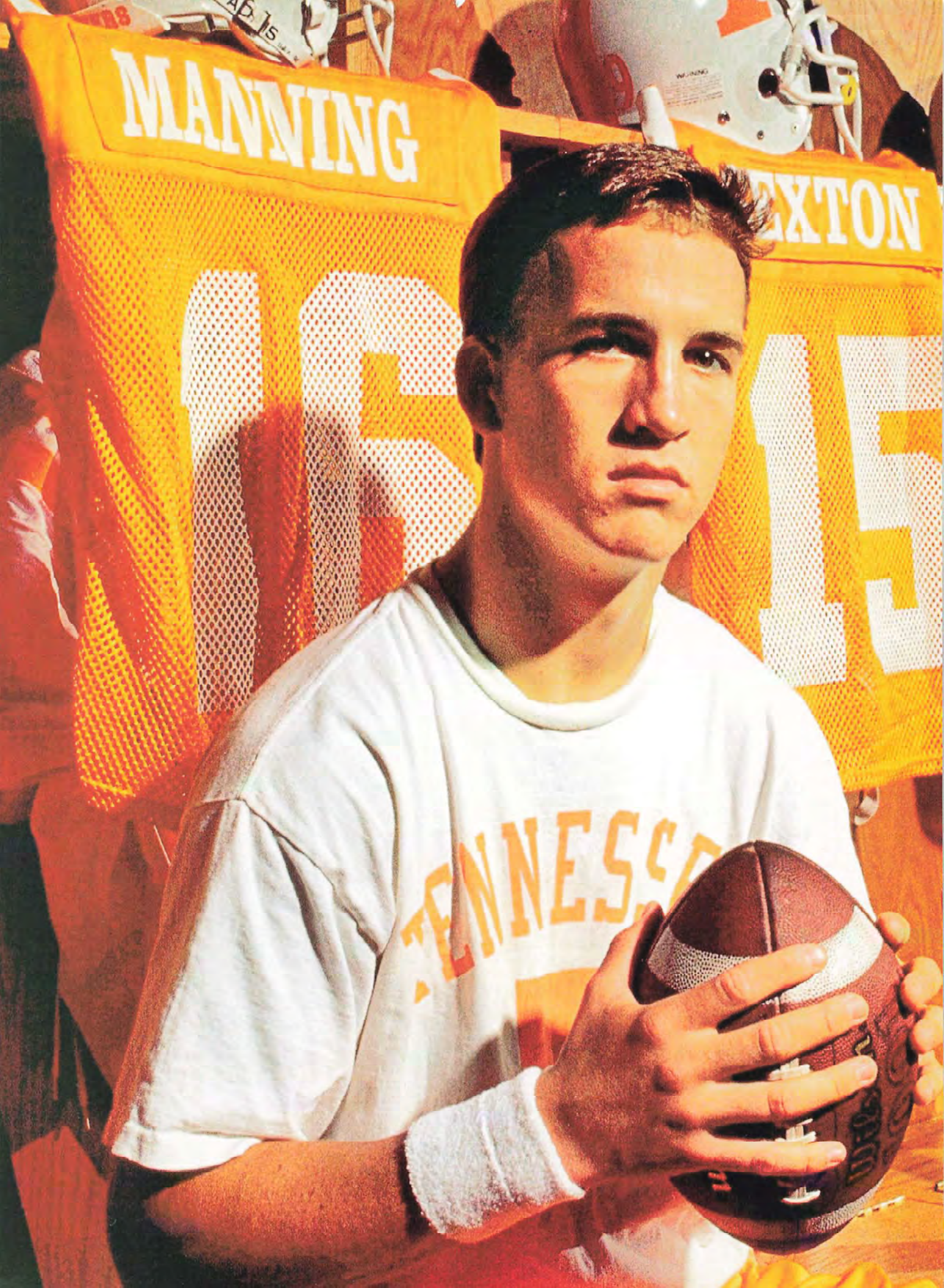
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Denver



**THE YOUNG
VOLUNTEER**

*In the Tennessee
locker room before his
sophomore season.
July 1995*

Photograph by
Doug Devoe
Sporting News/
Getty Images





**COLT OF
PERSONALITY**

*Preparing to face
the Giants in East
Rutherford, N.J.
November 14, 1999*

Photograph by
Al Tielemans
For Sports Illustrated





A BRONC'S TALE

That familiar jog: Catching up to his offense after a long completion in his final game.
February 7, 2016

Photograph by
Deanne Fitzmaurice
For Sports Illustrated



Super Send-off

There's no sweeter way to head into retirement than with a new championship ring. Peyton Manning's career always felt like something out of a storybook, and he gave it the perfect ending

✂ By Peter King

Photograph by
Simon Bruty
For Sports Illustrated

T

HREE DAYS before the winningest quarterback in NFL history would play His Last Game, he lined up his offense around the defensive 20-yard line and barked out signals. This would be the last full series of plays in the Super Bowl 50 practice week for the Broncos at Stanford Stadium, their home for the week . . . and maybe the last full series of practice plays in Peyton Manning's life.

The sun was nearly touching the top of the west stands of the stadium on this beautiful California winter afternoon, creating lengthening shadows on the field as Manning directed traffic.

"Be alert! Be alert!" he called out, motioning Emmanuel Sanders across the formation. And Manning shouted out the play, which began with "Z Motion!" And then the snap, and then . . . nothing. No one open.

"One more time!" Manning yelled, annoyed. "Do it again!"

And the offense did, Sanders trolling the back of the end zone and Manning hitting him for a touchdown.

Manning completed 24 of 28 passes against the scout team defense, and his coach, Gary Kubiak, said afterward that this was as good as the 39-year-old Manning had looked all season. Around the Broncos as the week went on, there was growing confidence that Manning could once more have a Manning-of-2013 game.

And then he didn't.

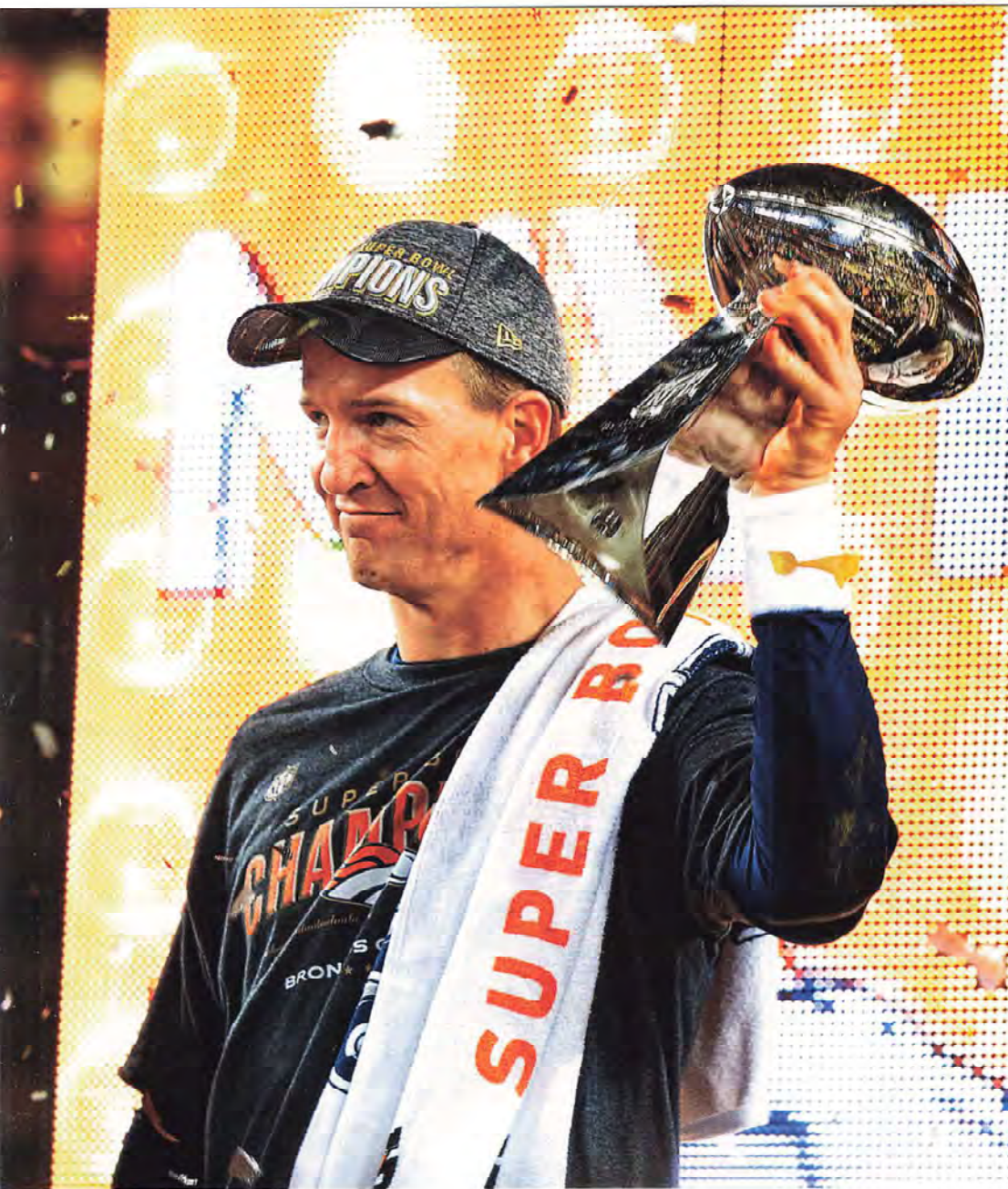
And then the Broncos won the Super Bowl. By 14.

And Manning was fine with being along for the ride.

"I've just had a real peace this year," Manning told me 90 minutes after the 24-10 win over the Panthers. "I didn't know how it was going to work out. I didn't know what was going to happen. But I'm at the point . . . I'm O.K. with that."

GOODBYE TO ALL THAT

We didn't know for sure at the time, but hoisting the Lombardi Trophy after Super Bowl 50 would turn out to be Manning's final act on an NFL field.



big mistake, he must have been thinking. *Punts can be your friends*. “I’m buying your theory,” his father, Archie, said to me the day before his son’s final game. “I really think he’s fine with it. Look at him. He’s happy. He’s peaceful. I think you have to put this in some perspective. He had four neck surgeries [in 2010 and ’11]. He might never have played again. But playing again, and playing well when he came back—what a blessing.”

Late in the season, when the rehab was slow and the Broncos were struggling on offense, losing to Oakland and Pittsburgh in succession, Kubiak was convinced the team was good enough to overcome not knowing if or when Manning would play. “There can still be a fairy-tale ending to this season,” he confided to a friend in December.

There was, of course. Manning returned to play the second half of the final regular-season game, then was a complementary player in the Pittsburgh and New England playoff wins,

IT MUST be daunting, and it must be a relief, to go from winning like Clayton Kershaw to winning like Mark Buehrle. To be utterly dominant, and then to be along for the ride on a team that hits four home runs every night. The way the Blue Jays battered the ball late last season is the way the Broncos’ defense beat Ben Roethlisberger, Tom Brady and Cam Newton in the playoffs. In the Super Bowl, Manning could complete 13 of 23 for 141 yards, with two turnovers and a 56.6 rating, and the Broncos could still be the ’85 Bears.

“This is a game Peyton never would have dreamed of playing 10, 12 years ago,” said his old coach, Tony Dungy. “But when you win the Super Bowl, you’re fine with it.”

My theory is that Manning, while rehabbing his heel and lifting and getting stronger in the 48 days he was out of the Denver lineup during the 2015 season, looked around and realized he didn’t have to throw for 250 anymore for his team to have a chance to win. That was most of the time in Indianapolis, and much of his first two years in Denver. *Just don’t make the*

all the while having the free world speculating about his possible retirement. “I called him,” said Dungy, “and I said, ‘I don’t know what you’re going to do, but if you haven’t decided yet, don’t decide now. Don’t decide at halftime of the last game, or five minutes after the last game. Don’t do it in the moment.’ I think Dick Vermeil made that decision in the moment, and he regretted it. I said, ‘Let the adrenaline wear off and then decide.’”

As Manning said on Super Bowl Sunday night, “I thought that was some good advice, to take some time and get away. Coach said, ‘Promise me you’ll do that.’ It felt like I was back in Indy and he was telling me, ‘Hey, be smart with this ball on third down.’”



BIG STAGES

Before the win over the Panthers, Manning's Super Bowl appearances included a win over the Bears in XLII (top) and losses to the Saints in XLIV (middle) and Seahawks in XLVIII (bottom).

ON SATURDAY night before Denver faced the Panthers, Kubiak asked captains Manning and Demarcus Ware to speak to the team. Ware took a religious tone. "When you walk into the valley of the shadow of death," Ware said, "you're not alone." And he showed images of the offense, the defense and the special teams on the big screen, to emphasize the team aspect of the coming day.

Manning did it differently. He talked about the people in the organization, the unsung contributors they wouldn't know, or know well. He quoted a favorite pastime of Kubiak's: The coach's preference to use Wise Words through the year to pass along a lesson. "One of my favorites," Manning said, "is, 'Life is fair. Keep working.'" Quarterback coach Greg Knapp said it was the

best team-unifying speech he's heard from a player in his years in football.

On Sunday morning, when Kubiak saw Manning at the team hotel, he asked: "How'd you sleep?"

Manning said, "Like a baby. Ten-and-a-half hours." Much longer than usual.

Whoa. Maybe the man really was at peace. The game was, in many ways, 1966 football. Quarterbacks playing inefficiently, at least in part because of the ceaseless pressure from both defenses. And it came down to, at the end, Denver trying to play keepaway. Third-and-nine, Denver 26, 5:35 left, 16-10. Surely Manning would try to convert through the air. No, sir. "I thought I saw him change the play to a run," said Dungy. And Manning did. C.J. Anderson, gain of two. Punt. An incompletion would have taken maybe seven seconds off the clock. The two-yard run ate up 44 seconds.

Manning was playing four corners. He didn't care. Peyton Manning won a Super Bowl without throwing a touchdown pass. He went 3-0 in the postseason and didn't throw for a touchdown in two of the three wins. But he had his second Super Bowl title. When asked outside the locker room afterward about retirement, Manning said he wasn't sure. "I have one thing

"Nobody loves quarterbacks more than me," Manning said, "and I think I have an even greater appreciation for the position after this year."

I'll say," he continued. "I've had good experience with making some decisions, choosing where to go to college, staying for my senior year in college and deciding which NFL team to play for in free agency four years ago. I've taken time on all those, I've prayed about it, I've talked to some people about it and I think I will do that with this. But I have a peace about it whichever way it goes. I'm glad I have been able to get through these two weeks with the focus staying on the team, because that is what it has been about this year. I've been a part of it."

His final season was the kind of year Manning had never come close to experiencing as one of the best players ever. Yanked from the lineup. Hurt in midseason. A backup when he returned. Coming back to win a Super Bowl.

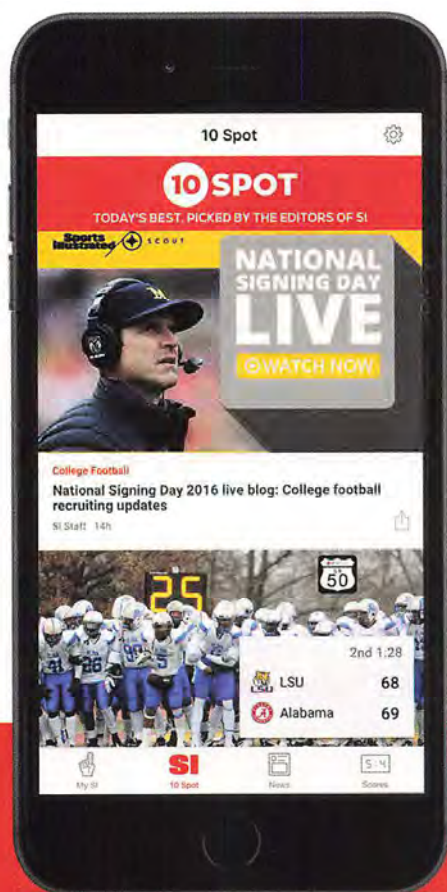
"Somebody could say, this year, you really did everything as a QB," Manning said, sounding wistful. The bus was waiting on him, and he could feel the world waiting for him. For once, he didn't seem to care.

"I hadn't been a backup, hadn't really been injured. I played a long time, but I'd only seen it from one way. I know there are a couple scenarios that I haven't been in, but I covered a lot of bases this year. There is a real perspective to that. And it was really sort of educational for me.

"You know nobody loves the quarterback position more than me. Today, with the 50th Super Bowl and the league bringing back all the MVPs, I saw Phil Simms and I saw Joe Montana and Steve Young out there on the field before the game. I wanted so badly to find a way to be out there for that MVP picture with Eli [his brother] and Tom Brady and Joe Namath. Impossible. There was no way I could do it. But nobody loves quarterbacks more than me and I think I have an even greater perspective and appreciation for the position after this year. You find out a lot. And it certainly ended up in a real good way today, didn't it?"

The smile on his face, the wide, wide smile, told the story. □

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Historic Figures

Stats tell the story of an unparalleled career

539

Career touchdown passes, the most all time—nine more than the Bears' franchise has thrown since 1988.

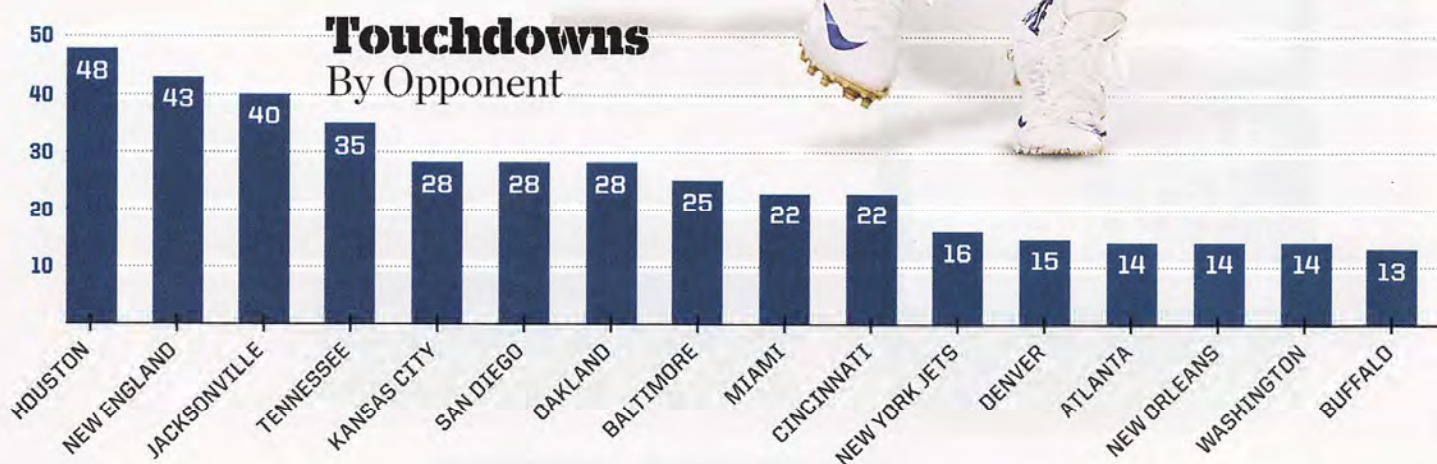
200

Career wins as a starting QB, including regular season and postseason, the most of all time. The Super Bowl 50 victory broke a tie with Brett Favre at 199 wins.



17 **Times Manning faced QB rival Tom Brady.** The Patriots won 11 of those matchups.

4 **Manning-Brady showdowns that came in the AFC championship game.** Manning won three of them.



40.875

Aggregate distance, in miles,
of Manning's career regular-
season completions.

68,102

**Combined career passing
yards of Archie and Eli
Manning through 2015.**
That's 3,838 less than Peyton's
career total.

2

**Yardage of Manning's last
completion, a two-point
conversion in the fourth
quarter of Super Bowl 50, to
wide receiver Bennie Fowler.**
Manning's first completion came
on his first career pass in 1998,
a 15-yarder to Marshall Faulk.

39%

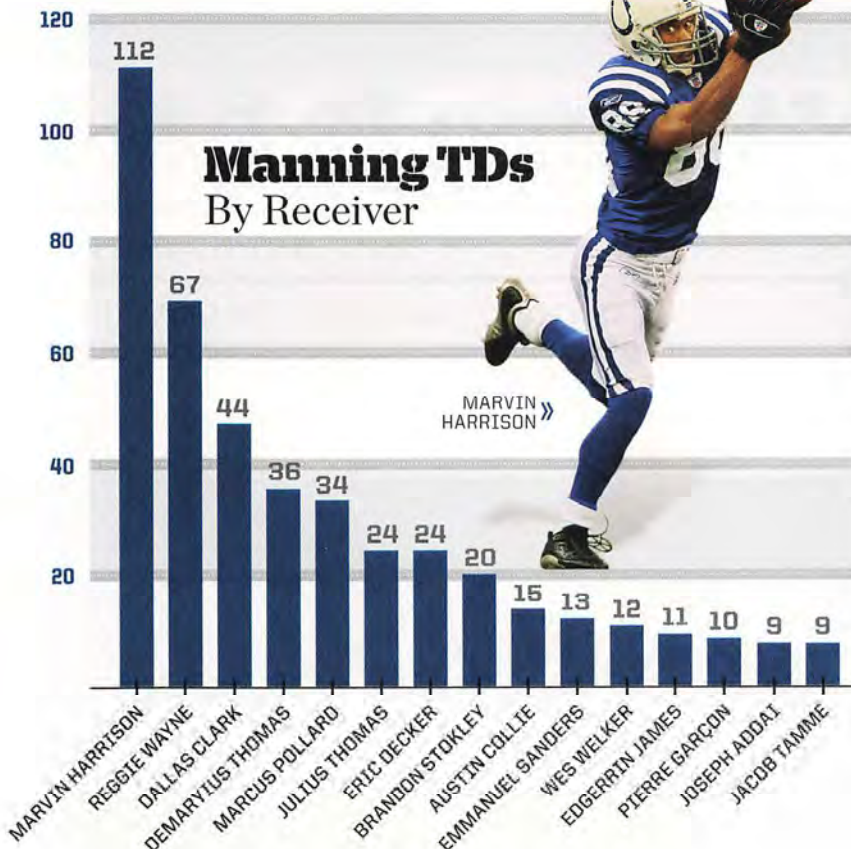
**Frequency with which
Manning threw on first down,**
tied with Steve Young for the
highest percentage of all time.

547

**Completions of 25 yards
or more, the most ever.**

112

**Touchdown passes from
Manning to Hall of Famer
Marvin Harrison, the most
of any quarterback-receiver
combination in history.**



71,940

Career passing yards, the most in NFL history.



3-0 **Peyton's career record against his
brother Eli.** Peyton defeated Eli's
Giants two times as a Colt and once as a Bronco.



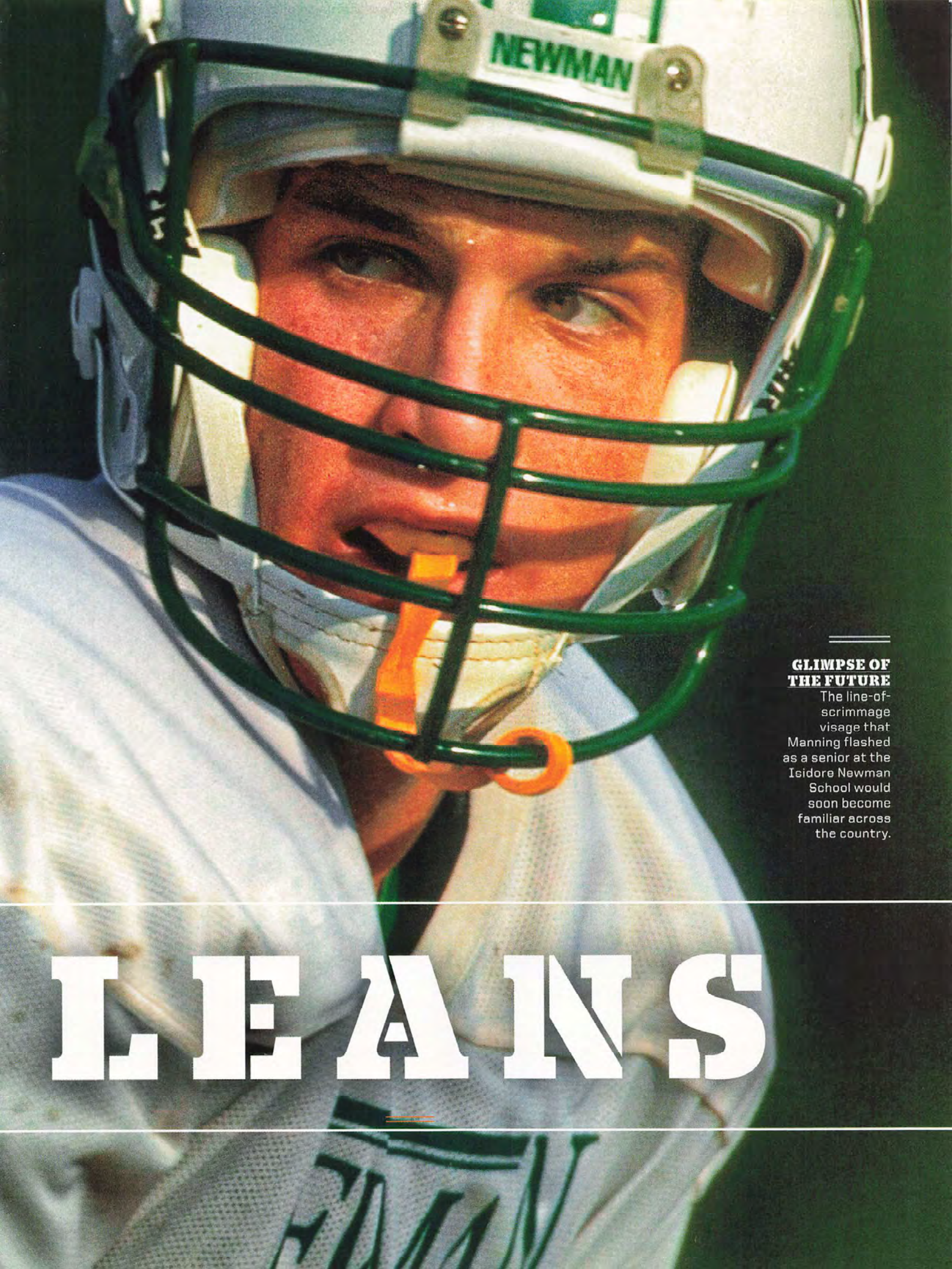
Where It All Began

Long before he became a national celebrity,
Peyton Manning was the pride of the Crescent City—
and the local hero carried the spirit of his hometown
wherever his football talents would take him

Photograph by
Bill Frakes
For Sports Illustrated



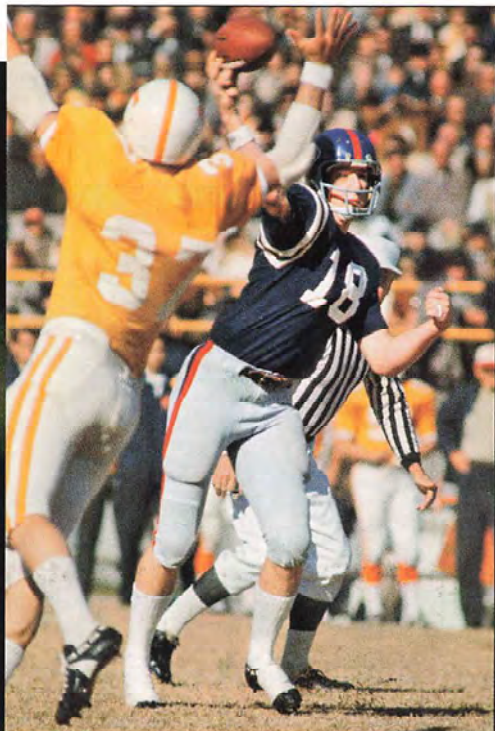
NEW OR



**GLIMPSE OF
THE FUTURE**

The line-of-scrimmage visage that Manning flashed as a senior at the Isidore Newman School would soon become familiar across the country.

LEANS





Like Father, Like Son

Archie Manning built a seemingly perfect childhood for his boys: perfect family, perfect home . . . and perfect pipeline to his alma mater. But as a prized high school recruit, Peyton was eyeing a different path to QB stardom

→ **By John Ed Bradley**

Photographs by
Bill Frakes
For Sports Illustrated

T

HE BOYS used to go to the Superdome and sit among the fans wearing rumpled paper bags over their heads. This was 13 years ago, back when Elisha Archibald Manning III—the tall, redheaded fellow who happened to be their father—was quarterback of the New Orleans Saints.

Forget that Archie Manning was the NFL's Most Valuable Player a couple of years before, or that he was "a franchise player without a franchise," as his friend Hank Stram liked to say. Since 1971 he had been the leader of a team that had managed to break even only once with him behind center. And people simply had lost patience with him. The Aints, everyone called the team. Even Manning's sons, Cooper, 7, and Peyton, 5, were sick and tired of the losing.

So one Sunday afternoon Archie was down on the field, being terrorized. He was getting flushed from the pocket, forced to run for his life. And there was not a thimbleful of mercy left anywhere on this earth. "You suck, Manning," fans were beginning to shout.

They were booing, too, and it was all Archie's wife, Olivia, could do to maintain her composure. Poor Olivia. She was pregnant with their third child, the one who would be Eli. But if she just could've protected Archie, who was as fine and dear a husband and father as

SECOND COMING

It didn't take long for high school opponents to realize that the new number 18 would be even better than his father (inset) was at Ole Miss.



the Good Lord ever put on this earth, and who, if kind deeds meant anything, really shouldn't have had an enemy in the whole, entire universe.

"You suck, Manning! You . . . suck!"

Well, enough was enough. Olivia turned to confront the detractors, but she had been raised too well to put up much of a fight. And her voice was too soft, her accent too Southern. Every word evoked pictures of kudzu and porch swings, of funeral fans and mason jars filled with icy-cold lemonade. Olivia started to speak, but more voices rained down. These latest were little voices, and familiar to boot.

Olivia wheeled around to see where they were coming from, and there sat her own two sons, Mannings themselves. "Boo!" Cooper and Peyton were yelling along with most everybody else in the house. "Boo, Archie! Boo!"

To see him today, you would never know that Archie Manning ever did anything but win. At 44 he lives with his wife and three sons in a big yellow house in New Orleans's Garden District, and it seems he's still the city's quarterback, even though he is from Drew, Miss., and also played for the Houston Oilers and the Minnesota Vikings before retiring eight years ago. As folk heroes go, none can equal Manning's status in the Crescent City, except perhaps for a Cajun chef or two and maybe the spook novelist Anne Rice, who lives in a mansion up the street from the Mannings. Archie and three partners own a couple of Gold's Gyms in the area and a third in Jackson, Miss. Each week he reports on the Saints as a radio color analyst, and he also serves as a spokesman for more than half a dozen companies.

If ever Archie were to surrender his crown as the city's quarterback, the most likely successor would not be the current man of the hour, Wade Wilson. Though he has played well for the Saints, the city still regards him with suspicion because he played for the Atlanta Falcons, the one NFL club Saints fans truly hate.

No, if anyone were to inherit Archie's mantle, it would be his own son Peyton, a senior quarterback at a small private school called Isidore Newman and one of the most coveted prep players in the country. Since spring about 60 schools have been in touch with either him or his coach. Among those leading the chase for Peyton are Florida, Florida State, Tennessee, Michigan, Texas, Texas A&M, LSU and Ole Miss, the school where Archie first encountered fame and fortune two decades ago. Peyton



LETTER PERFECT

Archie (with his boys—Peyton is in stripes—at Ole Miss in 1986, right), gently pushed his alma mater, but the mail Peyton got from recruiters outweighed family tradition.



If anyone were to inherit Archie's mantle as the city's quarterback, the most likely successor would be his own son Peyton.

plans to make five official visits and commit to a school the week before the Feb. 2 signing date.

Last year Peyton passed for 2,345 yards and 30 touchdowns, with only four interceptions. This year he's on pace to better those numbers. The only knock against him has been his foot speed, although he has improved on that. In the off-season Peyton trained with shoes designed to lengthen his Achilles tendon, giving his stride more spring. Last year he ran the 40-yard dash in 5.0 seconds; now he's at 4.8. Not that it matters much. As one recruiter said, "With a quarterback that big, who can throw the ball like he can, you'd be silly to have him running anyway."

Archie was known as a scrambler with a flair for improvisation; he could pass the ball underhanded if need be or run the blind bootleg unbeknownst to everyone on the field but himself. Although Peyton's physical resemblance to his father is uncanny, he's a classic drop-back passer more in the mold



of a Namath or a Marino, and his arm, some contend, is already better than Archie's ever was.

"He's got great athletic ability," says Saints coach Jim Mora, who watched Peyton work out this summer. "If there's any better quarterback his age out there in the country, I'd just like to see him."

"Nothing but genetics can explain how that boy looks," says Jim Poole, a former college teammate of Archie's.

Is Peyton really that good, worthy of his place at the top of virtually every recruiting service's list of high school talent? Or was he simply born with the right pedigree? "When I first heard that Peyton was Archie Manning's son, I admit that operated negatively in my evaluation of him," says Allen Wallace, publisher of *Super-Prep* magazine. "I wondered whether the hyperbole used to describe him had something to do with the fact that he was the son of a former great player. But I've talked to more than 20 different programs, and they all say the same thing: Peyton is simply a great player. And that's why we've listed him No. 1."

Two years ago Peyton and his brother Cooper, then a senior at Newman, formed one of the most prolific pass-and-catch tandems in Louisiana. It was, Archie says now, "the greatest fall I ever spent in my life. The only problem was that after the games, I had to cover my head and hide from the other receivers' parents." When Cooper earned a scholarship to Ole Miss, it seemed a lock that Peyton would follow. But as a freshman Cooper was found to have a congenital spinal condition that resulted in surgery and the end of his football career. With the Manning-to-Manning scenario at Ole Miss no longer a possibility, Peyton's future suddenly was less certain. "I honestly don't know where I'm going," he says.

The debate among those who follow the Manning saga now goes like this: Should Peyton attempt to resurrect the glory that has cluded Ole Miss since his father's days, or should he choose a school like Florida State or Michigan, where he would be certain to compete for the national championship and personal awards such as the Heisman Trophy?

"Peyton doesn't take much crap," Cooper says with no small hint of pride. "If somebody were to tell him that he betrayed Ole Miss [by choosing another school], he's the type who'd get right in his face and tell him to shut up."

Archie is determined to let Peyton decide for himself, and Olivia, herself a former Ole Miss homecoming queen, is trying to do the same. "Some of my buddies have called and said, 'You make him go to Ole Miss,'"

Archie says. "They're real hard-core about it. And though I'm sure they mean well, they aren't thinking about what they'd do if Peyton was their son."

THE QUEST for Peyton, frantic since last spring, peaked in mid-September when he started telling some schools he wasn't interested. By this point Tony Reginelli, Peyton's coach at Newman, had dubbed so many highlight tapes for recruiters that he had nearly worn out the school's heavy-duty VCR. And the Mannings were under siege at home, where they had installed an extra phone line to handle the crush of recruiting calls, 23 of which came the first day college coaches were allowed to contact high school players, in August.

Peyton doesn't seem to mind the recruiting pressures or even acknowledge them. Football is his passion and always has been. As a kid of four he could execute a seven-step drop-back and fling a Nerf ball clear across the living room. When he was a little older, he could discuss the nuances of the game, having spent long days studying film of his dad.

Peyton enjoys the string of calls he receives each night because it gives him a chance to probe the minds of some of the best coaches in the game. As a matter of fact he complains only when recruiters shower him with too much praise or try to suck up to him. Earlier this season one Atlantic Coast Conference coach called after his team had lost a game and said, "Will you love me tonight, Peyton? I really need you to love me tonight."

Startled, Peyton answered, "Well, I don't know about that."

"I really do need a hug," the man continued. "I'm hurting."

It wasn't long before Peyton scratched that school off his list.

"We gotta get him," Cooper Manning's fraternity brothers at the Ole Miss Kappa Alpha house tell him all the time. "We've just gotta get him. Hey, Coop, can you help us get Peyton?"

It's not just the campus Greeks, either. Mississippi people in general seem somewhat frenzied these days at the notion that another of Archie's sons—and a quarterback at that—has come of age. To understand the reason, you have to first understand Archie's importance to the place. This spring Archie was named



quarterback for the Team of the Century at Ole Miss, and a year ago a newspaper poll rated him Mississippi's All-Time Greatest Athlete. These selections surprised no one. Back when he was playing for the Rebels, Archie was so idolized that even fans from Southern Mississippi and Mississippi State wrote him sweetheart letters. Had some civic group sanctioned a contest for the state's Most Desirable Redheaded Male, you could bet Archie would've taken home that trophy too, even though he has officially resided in Louisiana for more than 22 years.

Of late, people in Mississippi have shifted their focus from Archie to Peyton. How much would Peyton mean to the school? This season he received a letter from the Ole Miss football office detailing the Top 10 Advantages of Becoming a Rebel. The list would make David Letterman proud:

1. You can continue the Manning family tradition of success and happiness at Ole Miss.

2. You will afford convenience for your grandparents, mom and dad and brothers to see you play college football.

3. Your decision to attend the University of Mississippi will generate unequalled interest and enthusiasm among Ole Miss alumni, fans and supporters.

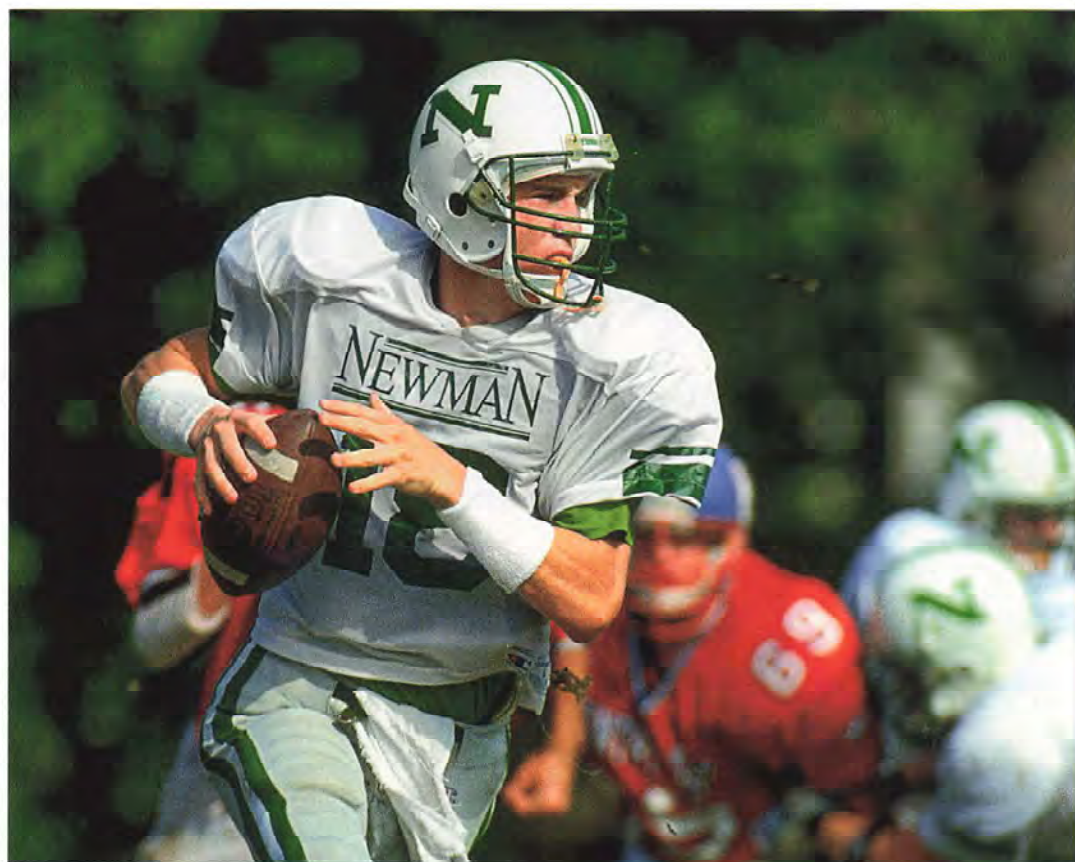
4. At Ole Miss, you would be exposed to a perennial top 10 school in America for beautiful women.

"You would enjoy that," his mother said one night after reading No. 4. "Ole Miss does have a lot of beautiful girls."

"Yeah, but I can't tell them apart," Peyton said. "They're all blonde and tan."

On and on the list went, ending finally with a declaration that if Peyton became a Rebel, the coach who recruited him would not only be "elated and ecstatic," but also would "ask for (or demand) a raise and probably get it."

The calls start every night at around seven and continue until 10. As soon as Peyton puts the



BROTHERS IN ARMS

Before Peyton wore number 18 at Newman, older brother Cooper (right, with Peyton in his days as number 14) was the wearer of the family jersey.

receiver down, another recruiter checks in. Peyton gives his parents a rundown after each conversation. "Hey, Dad, that was Tennessee."

"Tennessee, huh?"

Olivia, seated with her husband in the den, looks up from her crossword puzzle. "What if he goes to

Tennessee, Archie?" she asks with weary consternation. "He really likes Tennessee, doesn't he?"

"Tennessee's a great place," Archie replies.

Archie might've been a good football player, but as a father he turned out to be Hall of Fame. After the Saints traded him to the Oilers, in 1982, he leased an apartment in Houston and sometimes got so lonesome for his family that he would hop on a plane after practice and fly to New Orleans for dinner. He would eat, catch up on the news, then fly back to Houston.

The Oilers traded him to the Vikings in 1983, and he retired two years later. Upon his return to New Orleans, he took a position with a brokerage firm but soon found his time being gobbled up by work. Tired of the boys coming second to a job, he left after four years. "When your children get older," he reasoned, "they're going to leave you. I wanted to spend all the time with them that I could . . . before they were gone."

Archie and his own father were somewhat different in this regard. Buddy Manning had attended his share of Archie's games, but his job as manager of a farm machinery dealership in Drew had always seemed his top priority. "I don't know if I'll be able to make it tonight," he would say. But then you would see Buddy at the game, standing off to the side with a little straw hat on his head, a smile on his face.

Buddy committed suicide one Saturday in August 1969, just a few weeks before Archie began his junior year at Ole Miss. He had suffered a stroke a few years before, and his health had been poor ever since; also, the business was struggling. Archie came home from a wedding reception and found his father in a bedroom, blood on his chest. He called a doctor and a friend. He wanted to keep his mother and sister away until he could clean things up. Archie was only 19, but people will tell you he had never been more a man.

So Buddy missed out on Archie's glory—not just the football glory that began in earnest that year, but the family glory that always meant far more to Archie. He missed Archie and Olivia's big church wedding in 1971. And he missed the births of their three boys and all the magic that came with them.

Back when he was still playing for the Saints, Archie returned home from practice each day and organized games for Cooper and Peyton and their neighborhood friends. Archie often filmed the games with his camcorder, pretending they were being broadcast on national TV. One day the boys lined up for pregame introductions, each stating his name, age and favorite team and player.

"Cooper Manning. Six years old. My favorite player is Roger Staubach. And I really like the San Diego Chargers."

Peyton stepped up, gave a smile, and



"What if he goes to Tennessee?" Olivia asks Archie with weary consternation. "Tennessee's a great place," Archie replies.

said, "Peyton Manning. Age of four. And my favorite team is Wes Chandler."

Everyone laughed and pointed a finger at him, and Peyton knotted his soft, dimpled hands and started swinging. Just out of diapers and already he was mean and feisty, and he hated to lose. "You need an attitude adjustment," Archie had to tell him time and again. One day they got into a tiff, and Peyton said, "If you don't stop it, I'm going to tell Mama what you got her for Christmas." Archie stopped it. He knew the boy was serious.

After home games Cooper and Peyton joined Archie in the Saints' dressing room and visited with their favorite players. "We'd hang around with all these naked guys," Peyton recalls, "and it was real normal." Later he and his brother went out on the Superdome floor, fashioned footballs from strips of discarded tape and played rough-and-tumble the length of the field. The contests almost always ended in a fight, with Archie stepping in

as peacemaker. "The day you two can finish a game without a fight will be a great day in my life," Archie told them.

That day didn't come until Peyton's sophomore year at Newman when he won the starting quarterback job and Cooper, a senior receiver, realized that he had to make peace with his brother or never see another pass thrown his way. In the first game Peyton rolled out and spotted Cooper wide open on a corner route. It was his first pass as a varsity player, and it looked certain to be a touchdown.

Peyton let go a perfect spiral, and Cooper held up his hands to grab it. But the ball sailed right through his fingertips.

"What was that?" Olivia asked Archie up in the stands. Later she said, "Cooper didn't miss a single pass the year before. I think he did it on purpose."

Cooper went on to make nine catches in the first half alone, but Peyton didn't let him forget the miss. He brought it up at breakfast the next morning, and by all accounts it's still under discussion, more than two years later.

Despite playing half the season with numbness in his right hand, Cooper ended the year with 73 receptions, 1,250 total receiving yards and 13 TDs—all from the rocket arm of Peyton. Cooper became one of the most celebrated players in the state in what would be his final season. As a freshman last fall at Ole Miss, Cooper was found to have spinal stenosis, a congenital narrowing of the spine, and in June he had corrective surgery. Doctors told Archie and Olivia that one hard blow could leave him paralyzed; the Mannings insisted he give up the game.

"I don't feel sorry for Cooper," Olivia says. "Anybody who has as many friends as he does . . . well, that will take him so much further in life than football ever could. But Peyton, if it had happened to Peyton . . ."

"Peyton wouldn't have been able to handle it," Archie says.

The Mannings had Peyton X-rayed this summer, and doctors found that while his spinal column was narrow by some standards, he was in good shape to play football. This pleased no one as much as Cooper, who now is his brother's biggest fan.

"For a while," Cooper says, "I was searching for how I was going to replace football. But that doesn't happen anymore. I accept it, and with Peyton doing so well, that makes everything easier. I concentrate on him."



IT'S THE Friday of the Newman-Country Day game in mid-September. Archie arrives at the stadium about an hour before kickoff and walks up to the front gate with his wallet in hand. "Who do I pay?" he says, speaking to an empty chair. "Do I pay here? How's this work?"

The teams are on the field, loosening up. After a while he goes and sits at the top of the bleachers, easily the best seat in the house from which to watch Peyton.

"I hope Country Day scores a couple of touchdowns early," Archie says. "That way Peyton'll get to put it up some."

Newman jumps ahead 34-7 at the half, mainly behind the pinpoint passing of Peyton, and at the start of the third quarter the coach for Country Day begins to holler at the ref. "Hey, stripes! Why don't you stop watching Manning and start watching the game? You'll get to watch him the next four years on TV!"

The final score is 46-7. Peyton plays little in the second half, but he does produce one surprising moment when he fakes to a running back, holds the ball against his hip and sprints up the sideline for a long gain. "The blind bootleg," Archie says, standing and applauding. "Did you see that, Olivia? It was the blind bootleg."

No one has seen the play, not at a Newman game anyway. The team, somebody says, doesn't have it in its playbook. "I guess he got that from me," Archie finally says. "From one of my old game films. Watch, when I go down to see him, it'll be the first thing he brings up."

The game ends, and Archie walks down to the field to shake his son's hand. "Did you see my blind bootleg?" Peyton asks, wiping grime from his face.

Archie takes his hand and gives it a long shake. "I sure did, Peyton. I saw it all right."

Long after most everyone has left, a group of kids run up to Archie, gives him a football and asks if he wouldn't mind throwing a few. The first runs a sideline pattern; Archie drills him as soon as he makes his break. The second simply flares out to the right, and Archie finds him, too. The third, a speedster, claws through the sod and goes long. "Keep going," Archie says. And then he lets loose with a wondrous spiral. The ball sails in a high clean arc, off toward the trees. It's just how he used to throw them, this one. And how Peyton throws them now. The pass goes straight up and comes straight down, and somehow it's the most amazing damn thing anybody ever saw. □

Portrait of A Passer

Two decades after getting to know the young Peyton, the author looked back on his visit with the boy who became a Manning

→ **By John Ed Bradley**

From *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*
December 23, 2013

P

EYTON WAS a 17-year-old senior at the Isidore Newman School in Uptown New Orleans when SI sent me to write about him in the fall of 1993.

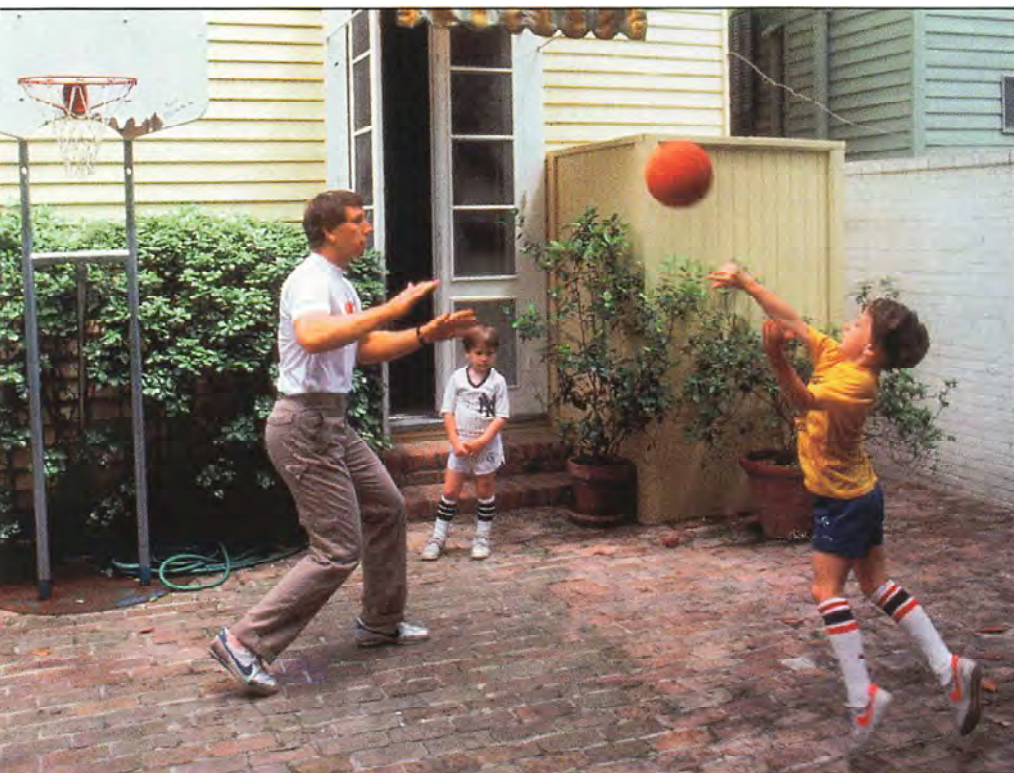
Tall and raw-boned, he was the top-ranked high school prospect in the country, and no fewer than 60 college programs were recruiting him. We met for interviews over a week at his family's home on First Street in the city's Garden District, a neighborhood distinguished by massive structures built by Southern gentry in the 19th century. I was never sure whether the Mannings' house was Italianate or Greek Revival, but it was a beautiful place where a beautiful family lived, and I always felt a little wistful when another day ended and I had to return to my hotel.

Peyton called me "Mr. John Ed," which certainly is a mouthful. And although he'd grown up in New Orleans, you could hear his parents' native Mississippi in his accent. "Get you something to drink, Mr. John Ed?"

By the time I arrived he was well into his last season as the Greenies' quarterback, and he still hadn't decided where he wanted to go to school. His dad, Archie, and mom, Olivia, installed an extra phone to help manage calls from recruiters, and it rang nonstop. The callers would identify themselves then politely ask for a minute of Peyton's time, when what they really wanted were the next four years of his life.

Peyton seemed unfazed by all the attention, and there was a seriousness about him that lifted only when he was goofing around with his 12-year-old brother, Eli. Even as a teenager Peyton was gripped by ambition and driven to be better than what others were. His big brother, Cooper, then a sophomore at Ole Miss, told me Peyton could be difficult, the way he always had to win even those contests that didn't mean anything. Then Archie served up his favorite Peyton story, which went like this:

One day when Peyton was a little kid, Archie invited All-Pro Saints linebacker Rickey Jackson over for dinner. Rickey and Peyton disappeared upstairs, where there was a mini-basketball hoop set up in the boys' room. Archie sat in the living room and listened to the thumping and the shouts as his son took on one of the NFL's fiercest players. Finally Rickey came trudging down drenched in sweat,



shaking his head, grumbling under his breath because Peyton had beaten him.

The Mannings cooked dinner for me a couple of nights. I remember Eli napping in front of the TV with his schoolbooks spread out around him while Peyton, not 10 feet away, talked X's and O's on the phone with a college coach. Toward the end of the week Archie and Olivia took me to Emeril's, the restaurant owned by chef Emeril Lagasse, who had not yet become a TV star. When Emeril heard that the Mannings were in his dining room, he had one of his staff escort us to the kitchen, and he served us there at a small table.

I finally got to see Peyton play—against Newman's rival, Country Day. Peyton towered over all the other players. Each of his passes seemed to possess its own genius. He threw a soft ball even when he threw hard, meaning his passes traveled the way receivers like them to: nose tilted slightly upward, making them easier to catch. The game was a blowout, but I felt lucky to see Peyton at this point in his football life. Seventeen, I kept reminding myself.

In my notebook I scribbled riffs about his confidence, his preternatural gifts and the expression of joy on his face as he faked out defenders on a blind bootleg. My favorite moment came when the Country Day coach yelled at the refs to stop watching Peyton and to start watching the game.

"I honestly don't know where I'm going," Peyton had told me that week. But I did, and in my estimation the college he chose probably wouldn't matter much. I could see with clarity the destiny that awaited him. While I didn't hear any complicated audibles before the snap or observe any odd gesticulating at the line, he still

GARDEN GROWTH

Backyard competitions in the Manning home—like when Archie and Cooper played hoops as Peyton watched in 1981—helped fuel the future QB's drive.

displayed a braininess that communicated a superior understanding of the game. The arm, the size, the footwork—all there in abundance. The courage, the leadership, the will; those as well. Late in the game I looked at Archie and said, "I understand now why everybody wants him. He's going to be one of the best ever."

Archie didn't reply. He gave a small laugh and turned back to the field.

After the game I told Peyton I wanted to take him and a date to lunch the next day. I mentioned several of the city's finer restaurants, where the check promised to be steep: Commander's Palace, Brennan's, Galatoire's. Did he have a favorite?

He didn't need long to think about it. "Domilise's,"

he said. It was a po'boy shop on Annunciation Street, in a working-class neighborhood. He added yet another surprise when he asked if he could bring a couple of his teammates, instead of the date.

I would talk to him on the phone over the years, but the last time I saw him was in 1999, when the magazine sent me to Indianapolis to write a story about Colts running back Edgerrin James. By now Manning was a brilliant young pro, but I still could see in him the boy I'd known back in New Orleans. I was out at practice, and Peyton spotted me from a field away. He called out my name when the workout was done, then jogged over and greeted me like an old friend.

I asked him a few questions about James, and he dutifully answered; then we got on the subject of home. He said his mom and dad had framed my story and hung it in his bedroom. He'd read it so many times, he said, that he knew the end by heart. I thought he was just being nice, but then he said, "The pass goes straight up and comes straight down, and somehow it's the most amazing damn thing anybody ever saw."

It was the last line of my story. And even as I winced at the clumsiness of my prose, I marveled at Peyton. They don't come any better. They didn't before. They won't again.



1



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5

THE NOLA YEARS

1. With Cooper and Eli at their dad's Ole Miss jersey retirement ceremony, 1986.

2. As a high school junior in 1992.

3. Ready to take some hacks as a Little Leaguer.

4. With Cooper (18) at Newman in 1991.

5. A happy grade-schooler.

6. With Archie and Cooper (with ball) outside the Manning home in the Garden District, 1981.

7. Family portrait in 1981. (That's Peyton in the yellow shirt.)



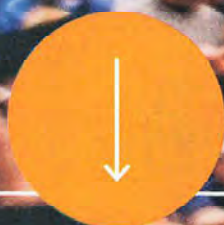
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MICHAEL C. HEBERT/USA TODAY SPORTS (1);
ARIANE KADOCH/THE TIMES-PICAYUNE (2);
COURTESY OF THE MANNING
FAMILY (3, 4, 5); LANE STEWART FOR
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (6, 7)



Reaching Rocky Top

It seemed preordained: The nation's top high school quarterback would follow in his famous father's Ole Miss footsteps. But Peyton Manning made the ultimate rebel move, carving his own college path and quickly making Knoxville a second home



TENNE

Photograph by
Patrick Murphy-Racey

**ONCE MORE,
WITH FEELING**

Manning struck up the Vols' band after his final game in Knoxville, a win over Vanderbilt on Nov. 29, 1997.



SEE





Here Comes Junior

Entering his third season as a Volunteer, Peyton was still Archie's boy but was quickly becoming his own man—living in the film room, dating his future wife and pushing everyone around him to be better

→ **By Tim Layden**

Photograph by
Patrick Murphy-Racey
For Sports Illustrated

September 16, 1995: Florida 62, Tennessee 37

R

AIN FALLS through suffocating humidity, forming deep, wide puddles at the corners of Florida Field. The Gators score a touchdown. And then another, and another, until the noise from beneath the umbrellas and ponchos begins to sound like the ceaseless roar of traffic. On the visitors' sideline Tennessee's sophomore quarterback, Peyton Manning, sits on a metal bench, hair matted to his forehead, anger fixed on his soft face.

He had opened his life to a reporter in the week before this embarrassment. The story was supposed to be about his preparation for a game, about how he started on Monday morning with a weight workout in the predawn darkness and then went straight to calculus up on the Hill, a cluster of classrooms that many Vols athletes avoid because it's too far from the sports facilities. It was supposed to be about how he studied game film every afternoon and evening and did more interviews than the rest of his teammates combined. About how when he arrived at English class one morning, two women asked him to help them distill the plot of *The Awakening* because he had read the novel and they hadn't. About how he seemed to fit the forgotten image of what a college athlete could be.

That afternoon in Gainesville, Manning walked from the floor of

TOSS IN THE DEEP END

A notably skinnier Manning battled Alabama as a freshman, the season he took over as Tennessee's starter in Week 5, leading the team to a 7-1 record and a victory in the Gator Bowl.



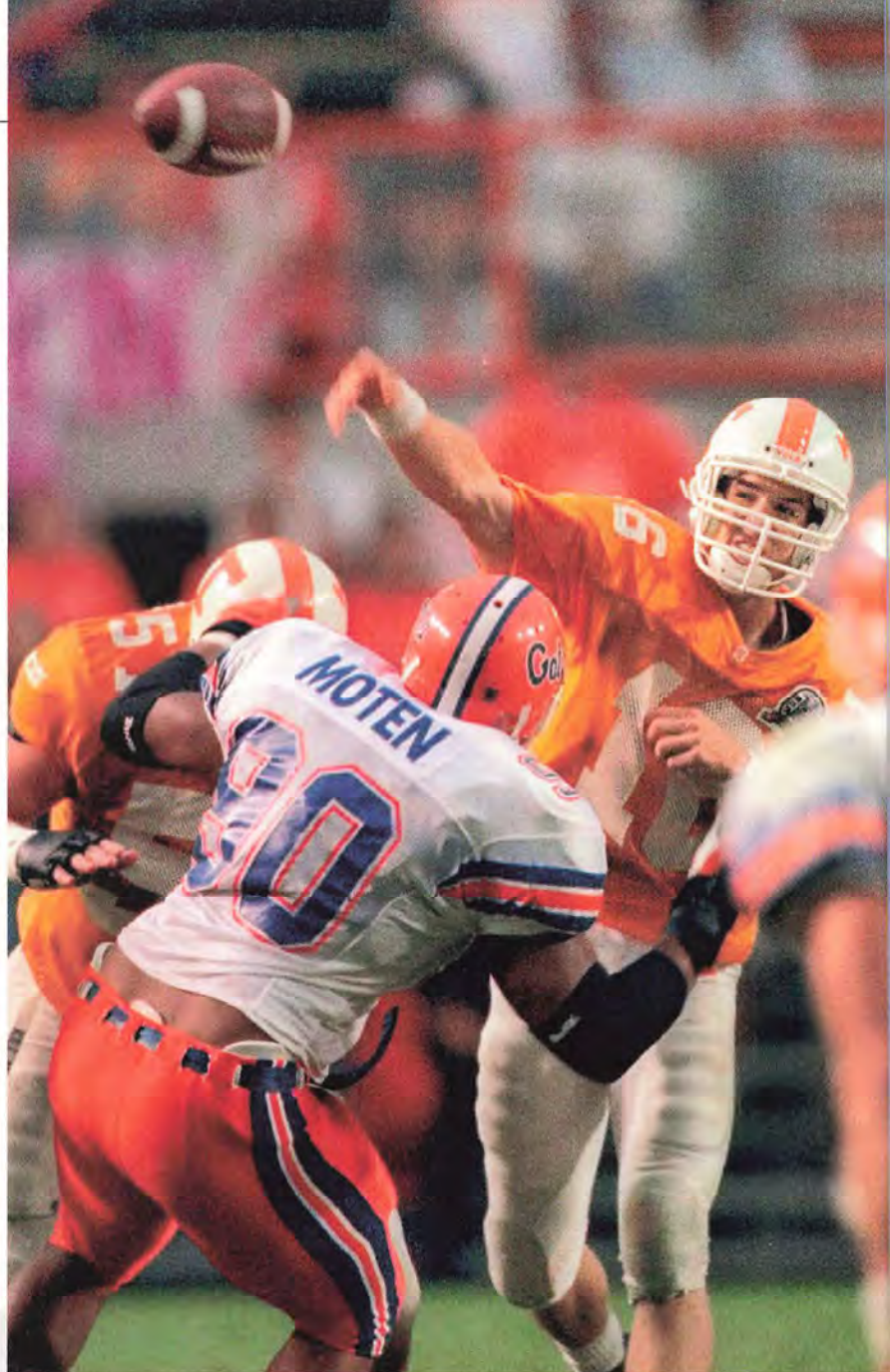
the stadium and paused in the tunnel outside the locker room. There he embraced his father, who whispered to him, "We're proud of you." Then Peyton clattered away. In the wake of this devastating loss, there would be no story.

Eleven months have passed, and another college football season beckons. Peyton Manning is the player of the year before the first ball is snapped. He holds in his 20-year-old hands the dreams of Tennessee football fans, who desperately want an SEC title and the Volunteers' first national championship since 1951, and who want to see Manning become the school's first Heisman Trophy winner. He is also some NFL team's living fantasy, a 6' 5½", 223-pound once-in-a-decade catch who might enter the draft after this, his junior season. "He's the first pick," says the Giants' director of college scouting, Tom Boisture. "Last year, this year, next year, whenever he wants." Manning is in a magical place, soon to be a wealthy professional, but for one more year he is a throwback, living an ideal. Now *there* is a story.

It begins in the fourth game of Manning's freshman season, when he becomes the starting quarterback after injuries to two upperclassmen. The Volunteers would go on to win 18 of 20 games with him as the starter. In 1995 they finished 11-1, ranked No. 3 in the country, as Manning threw 380 passes and had just four intercepted. "Here's the way I look at it," says Mississippi State defensive coordinator Joe Lee Dunn. "Florida's Danny Wuerffel is a good college quarterback. Peyton is a good pro quarterback. Right now."

When NFL scouts make their spring pilgrimages to college campuses, they are supposed to evaluate only seniors, but when they came to Knoxville they couldn't help but be distracted by a sophomore. Chargers quarterbacks coach Dwain Painter not only noticed Manning—"I had already heard our scouts raving about him," says Painter—but also approached him to ask about several of Tennessee's seniors. Who would know them better than their quarterback? In return, Manning grilled Painter. Having just studied a tape of the Dolphins' playoff loss to the Bills, Manning was curious about the coverages that had seemed to confuse Dan Marino. Painter was taken aback. Such inquisitiveness is not normal in a player so young. Says Painter, "After talking to him, it's obvious he's way ahead of most young quarterbacks."

After his sophomore campaign, Manning attended the banquet for the Davey O'Brien Award, given annually to the quarterback voted best in



"The idea that Peyton is just this mental machine is way off," says Cutcliffe. "He's got quick feet, great balance, velocity on the ball."

the nation by a panel of sportswriters. Wuerffel won; Manning was a finalist. Runners-up seldom attend the ceremony, but Manning went to Dallas with a purpose. At a reception for past winners, Manning worked the room for tutelage—from the Eagles' Ty Detmer ("I wanted to talk to him about the West Coast offense he played under in Green Bay, and because I knew his father coached the passing game in high school and because he went to Brigham Young," says Manning), from the Panthers' Kerry Collins ("Because he was a rookie last year") and from the 49ers' Steve Young. ("He was surrounded the whole time, but I told him I'd love to pick his brain sometime.") Not a moment of idle chatter. "I figured I had two hours with those guys," says Manning.



FOOTBALL IS FAMILY

Archie and Olivia (above with Peyton) met at Ole Miss and regaled Peyton with stories of the way things were in Oxford. Peyton attempted to re-create that magic both on and off the field in Knoxville.

"I wasn't going to waste it by making small talk."

This surprises no one at Tennessee, where Manning has flabbergasted teammates and coaches with his work ethic. "He came in with an attitude that I've never seen in any freshman," says fifth-year senior fullback Eric Lane. Manning went to Knoxville six weeks earlier than most other freshmen to acclimate himself to the program and participate in workouts with receivers and running backs. "He wanted to get as much work done as possible, every day," says Lane.

When senior quarterback Jerry Colquitt and junior backup Todd Helton were injured in the first and fourth games of the season, respectively, Manning got the chance to use what he had learned. He became the starter, and Brannndon Stewart, another highly regarded freshman, became the backup. (Stewart transferred to Texas A&M.)

Tennessee coach Phillip Fulmer remembers a practice during Manning's sophomore year when the team was doing a blitz-pickup drill, in which offensive linemen and running backs work on blocking. "There are no receivers in the drill," says Fulmer. "All the quarterback has to do is take a snap and drop back to give us the proper depth. But here's Peyton coming up to the line, giving signals to receivers who aren't out there, doing his checks, dropping back full speed, setting up . . . and there's nobody out there. All the coaches were laughing, but that's the way he lives his life. Peyton lives to be better. He's like the coach's little son who's 5' 9" and can't break an egg when he throws—except Peyton is 6' 5", with a world of talent."

In his sophomore year at Isidore Newman, the private school in New Orleans that he attended from kindergarten, Peyton first quizzed his father about studying game film. This was logical because his father, Archie Manning, played quarterback in the NFL for 14 years. Archie didn't push his son to study film then; the quality of tapes from high school games wasn't very good anyway. But two years later, when Peyton expressed an interest in perusing some NFL game films, Archie told him, "If you're going to watch film, do it the right way." By that he meant, *Don't watch*

the ball, watch the defense; fans watch the ball.

With this tiny piece of advice Archie helped create a monster who watches more videotape than Bob Saget. Reporters have phoned the Volunteers' film room late at night in search of offensive coordinator David Cutcliffe and instead reached Manning. Pizzas have been delivered to the film room so that Manning could eat a midnight meal while breaking down Alabama's goal line defense. Cutcliffe has done extra work on the weekends lest he be caught unprepared at Monday afternoon's quarterbacks meeting. "I know he's going to have a bunch of questions right away," Cutcliffe says of Manning. "He's somebody very special, and I don't want to let him down."

During his freshman year Manning was so eager that he couldn't keep himself from jumping on all queries made to Cutcliffe. One day Helton (who was selected as a first baseman by the Colorado Rockies in the first round of the 1995 baseball draft) lost his temper. "Peyton, don't answer my questions!" he shouted.

In the six days leading up to Tennessee's drubbing by Florida, Manning watched more than 20 hours of tape on his own. After the season his apartment mates moved Manning's VCR to the living room. "We figured maybe we could bring dates over and watch movies," says Vols senior linebacker Greg Johnson, one of Manning's best friends on the team. "That lasted maybe a month." The VCR was moved back to Manning's room.

Manning's apartment mates call him Caveman and his bedroom the Cave. On Saturday nights after home games, he often returns to his apartment to watch a tape of the game. "I'm guessing most college players are out celebrating on Saturday night," says Ashley Thompson, the 21-year-old University of Virginia senior whom Manning has dated since they met in the fall of 1994. ("Even Peyton's love life is set up pretty well," says his father. "He's crazy about Ashley, but he just doesn't have time for a girlfriend on campus.")

By the summer of 1995, Manning was organizing the informal passing drills that he had crashed the previous July. He left messages on the answering machines of wideouts and defensive backs. "It was tough for me, adjusting to his work ethic," says senior wideout Joey Kent, who caught 69 of Manning's in '95, nine for touchdowns. "He was so young."

Over time Manning has only tightened the screws. He began coordinating workouts in January 1996, only days after the Vols' 20-14 Citrus Bowl win over Ohio State. Often he would



gather a dozen teammates in Tennessee's field house, only to find the baseball team practicing there. The ballplayers gave Manning 15 yards to work with—it was their season and their practice after all. Manning took their 15 and raised them 10, until defensive backs were bouncing off infielders. Turf skirmishes ensued. Finally athletic director Doug Dickey confronted Manning and said, "Peyton, give way."

It was like telling Larry Bird not to shoot jumpers after practice. "He's telling me I can't come out here and throw," says Manning. "Well, I don't want to push it, but I stuck my opinion in there. We threw for 3,000 yards last year, completed 64%, because of what we were doing in January and February. You ask some quarterbacks, 'Hey, you been throwin'?' They say, 'Yeah.' Well, their idea of throwing is two quarterbacks playing catch. My idea is getting receivers and defensive backs out here. Something tells me it hasn't been done much here before, and that's why there was controversy."

It is not the first time that Manning's hyper-competitiveness has led him to cross an athletic department official. In his junior year of high school, after Manning made his annual transition from football to basketball (before going on to baseball in the spring), Newman basketball coach Billy Fitzgerald chose not to start him. Fitzgerald, a tough, successful coach who posts aphorisms by Bob Knight on the walls of his office, didn't think Manning was ready. Manning thought he was, so the two argued. The team's sixth man as a sophomore, Manning left the basketball team by mutual agreement. "It was typical of Peyton the competitor," says Fitzgerald. "I don't fault him for it. It was a privilege to coach him." On the morning that Manning signed with Tennessee, Fitzgerald was the second person he called.

"He taught me about toughness," says Manning. The payoff has been extraordinary. Manning's preparation has turned the college game into a plaything for him. On Oct. 7, 1995, Dunn, then the defensive coordinator for Arkansas, which would win the SEC's Western Division, threw everything but Nolan Richardson's 40 Minutes of Hell at Tennessee. Manning completed 35 of 46 passes for 384 yards and four touchdowns in a 49-31 victory. "We tried to make it complicated for him," says Dunn. "And he handled everything. He's really good."

It is Manning's mind that NFL teams covet most. As the pro game has become more complex, it has become more difficult for young quarterbacks to excel. "I don't think there's ever been a

quarterback who has been as prepared, mentally, as Manning is," says one NFL personnel director.

But some of his physical attributes and tools are ready for the pros too: the height, the quick release. Bobby Beathard, general manager of the Chargers and an old friend of Archie's, called Archie one night. "I was just watching the Tennessee-Alabama tape," said Beathard, who was evaluating an Alabama defensive back. "Tell me, how does your boy get rid of the ball so fast?"

The scouts whisper about Manning's weight and his arm strength, but most haven't seen him since last fall. He has gained nearly 10 pounds. He can squat 400 pounds and bench 315—a vast improvement from his freshman year. "The idea that Peyton is just this mental machine is way off," says Cutcliffe. "He's got that, but he's got quick feet, great balance, velocity on the ball."

There is little doubt about Manning's future. The questions are about details: How many dollars over how many years, paid by which NFL team and when? A speech communications major with a minor in business, Manning has a 3.58 GPA and is on course to get his degree as early as the summer of '97. If he leaves Knoxville before then, he will have given Tennessee three years, 29 wins, 20 home sellouts and maybe that first Heisman. His would probably be about the most logical early departure in history.



But, he says, "I've done crazier things than stay four years at Tennessee. Like coming to Tennessee in the first place. All I know is I'd like to play this fall without looking one day ahead."

His passion doesn't flow from the promise of NFL stardom but from his vision of college football as a pristine institution. He lives for Saturdays, not Sundays, because he grew up the son of Archie Manning, who—before he was the beaten, beleaguered quarterback of the Saints, Oilers and Vikings—was one of college football's last great heroes.

Archie went to Ole Miss in the fall of 1967 from the tiny Mississippi Delta town of Drew (pop. 2,143 at the time). By the end of his junior year, he had restored the Rebels to a place among the nation's elite teams and had been hailed as perhaps the best quarterback in a national class that included Stanford's Jim Plunkett, Notre Dame's Joe Theismann, Santa Clara's Dan Pastorini and Ohio State's Rex Kern. Archie was also the object of a statewide adoration that hasn't abated. "He was a legend, much larger than life," says author John Grisham, who grew up in Southaven, Miss. Grisham, who is



“That’s how I heard college football was, listening to my parents,” says Peyton. “I’m trying to get the whole experience, but the game has changed.”

six years younger than Archie, has twice invoked him in novels, putting a poster of Archie on a character’s wall in *A Time to Kill* and naming a Supreme Court justice Archibald Manning in *The Pelican Brief*.

Peyton immersed himself in his father’s college legacy after an Ole Miss fan sent the Mannings audiotapes of the Rebels’ epic 1969 upsets of Georgia and LSU. Peyton, then a junior in high school, popped the tapes into his stereo, lay across his bed and let history wash over him. He listened as his dad’s offense, every member a Mississippian, was described by the play-by-play man: “Manning brings ‘em to the line. There’s Mitchell from Columbus, Coker from Clarksdale. . . . Manning sprints out right, throws . . . touchdown! Touchdown, Ole Miss!” Peyton memorized the calls and embellished them: “Manning, the 6’ 3” Drew redhead, brings ‘em to the line”

He quizzed both his father and his mother, Olivia, the Ole Miss homecoming queen whom Archie married in 1971. They told him what college football was like, how magical Saturdays were, how they had double-dated with Archie’s teammates and their steadies. Peyton embraced his father’s past and formed a picture of his own future. He would be a quarterback, but not in the NFL. “Dad’s college career was such a bright memory,” says Cooper Manning, Peyton’s older brother. “His pro career was . . . what? Guys in the Superdome with bags on their heads.” So Peyton wouldn’t aspire to be Marino or Phil Simms or Dan Fouts. “I never once heard him say, ‘I want to be a pro football player,’” says his mother. “It was always, ‘I want to play college football.’” He would be a college quarterback. In the South. Just like Archie.

STAR WATCH

Manning’s now famous habit of devouring game film started when he was a kid, with help from his father, and continued at Tennessee, which impressed coach Fulmer and his teammates.

And if he is not quite the folk hero in the South that his father was—who could be?—he is still a celebrity. Last fall he sat in a Tennessee dorm with teammate Will Newman and a friend. Struck by late-night hunger, the friend ordered a pizza and was told the wait for delivery would be one hour. He asked Manning if he could use the quarterback’s name.

“O.K.,” said Manning, reluctantly.

“Five minutes,” said the pizza guy.

When the pie arrived, the delivery man said to Manning, “You must sign this hat for the owner of the restaurant. Please sign it ‘Welcome to America, Amir.’” And so Manning did.

In fact his fame brings privileges Manning never imagined. He attended a concert to celebrate the opening of the Lee Greenwood Theater in Gatlinburg, Tenn. (The invitation, unsolicited, had been delivered to Manning’s apartment.) Near the end of the show, during which Manning had been introduced and serenaded with a chorus of “Rocky Top,” the Volunteers’ anthem, a man in a suit hustled Manning to a backstage dressing room. “I walk in,” says Manning, still amazed, “and there’s George and Barbara and the governor.” That would be former President George H.W. Bush and his wife and Tennessee governor Don Sundquist. “Just the four of us,” says Manning. “Next thing I know we’re all posing for pictures together.”

He is celebrated in ways that befuddle him, such as when dozens of Tennessee families name their babies Peyton and send photos to the Tennessee football office for the namesake to see.

Manning is not seeking such stardom; he is chasing an entire life—one that he has sought to re-create since he first listened to those Ole Miss tapes in high school. He can recite his father’s Rebel lineups still: “Jernigan from Jackson, McClure from Hattiesburg. . . .” When he finishes, he gives a lopsided smile, the way he does when something strikes him as sweet or funny. “I would love to have played in the ‘60s,” he says with feeling. “Now, that would have been fun.”

Perhaps he is playing in the ‘60s. His own version of the ‘60s. Manning may make an ideal quarterback for the mid-‘90s, but in many



ways he belongs on Nick at Nite. His language is a fusillade of *yessirs* and *nosirs*, each accompanied by a deferential nod. At 7:30 a.m. on the day of Tennessee's spring game he was honored at a ceremony as the male athlete with the highest GPA in Tennessee's sophomore class. "Must be a soft sophomore class," he told the audience. Last spring Manning did inspirational speaking engagements (for which NCAA rules forbid payment) at the buzz-saw rate of four per week. He was also chairman of the Knoxville Multiple Sclerosis Read-a-thon. "You can talk about Peyton for hours, and it sounds like some fairy tale," coach Fulmer says of his quarterback.

Update

Days after the publication of this Aug. 26, 1996, story, Jamie Naughtright [née Whited] filed a sexual harassment and discrimination complaint against Tennessee, outlining a list of allegations that included the Manning incident. That case was settled in '97. Naughtright also sued Manning for defamation in 2002, after he wrote about her in the '01 book, *Manning*. That suit was settled in '03.

The allegations resurfaced after Super Bowl 50 when six unidentified accusers filed suit against Tennessee, claiming that it violated Title IX and created a "hostile sexual environment." The suit mentioned the Manning incident. In early February, media reports based on court documents and testimony from the 2002 defamation suit described the Manning-Naughtright incident in more lurid detail than outlined in her 1996 complaint.

Tennessee filed a motion to strike the Manning reference from the Title IX suit. Manning is not a defendant in that case and hasn't faced charges from the alleged incident with Naughtright. In his retirement press conference he said, "I did not do what has been alleged, and I am not interested in relitigating something that happened when I was 19."

ORANGE RUSH

As a junior Manning led the Vols to a 10-2 record and a final ranking of No. 9, and the Tennessee faithful loved every minute of it.

Even Manning's mistakes are the kind that a football star from a past era might commit. In the training room at Tennessee's Neyland-Thompson Sports Center he mooned cross-country runner Malcolm Saxon while assistant trainer Jamie Whited, a woman, knelt to examine Manning's right foot. The 27-year-old Whited saw what he did and felt it was directed toward her. She reported the incident to the athletic department. In punishment, Manning was made to run sprints at 6 a.m. and was barred from the training table for two weeks. "What I did lasted maybe one second, and it was not directed toward her, and there's no way I thought she could see," Manning says. "I like to play jokes with the guys. I realize now I've got to be careful."

When it comes to the game itself, however, Manning is reverential in a way that is rare among college players. On game days he sits in front of his dressing cubicle and reads the official program from cover to cover before he puts on his pads. When he meets with Cutcliffe, who graduated from Alabama in 1976 and briefly played there, the conversation turns inevitably to some slice of SEC history. "Then you see him just light up," says Cutcliffe. "For so many kids college football is a means to an end. Peyton has a true love of college football. He knows the way Saturday afternoons are supposed to smell in the South."

The smell is different now. Players are celebrated as much for their projected draft positions as for their college exploits. All the games are televised, which demythologizes the participants. The difference between Archie's era and Peyton's is only highlighted by the fact that Archie played at the smallest university in the SEC and on a team made up entirely of Mississippians. "That's how I heard college football was, listening to my parents," says Peyton. "I'm trying to get the whole experience, but the game has changed a lot. We've got guys on our team from all over the country. They're all great guys, but everybody does his own thing. It's different, that's all."

Peyton had long imagined a route that would have brought him closer to the path that his father followed. In the fall of 1992, Cooper entered Ole Miss as a full-scholarship wide receiver. Peyton was beginning his junior year at Newman, and it was plain to see that even as a gawky teenager with a modest arm, he had vast potential. The letters from college football programs had already begun to arrive, including one handwritten by Florida State coach Bobby Bowden. Many more would follow, but Peyton had already made his decision. He would go to Mississippi, and he would play with his brother.

They had always complemented each other. Cooper, two years older, was carefree and cool. Peyton was intense and serious. Cooper kissed off his schoolwork and made decent grades, says Peyton, "because all of his teachers fell in love with him." Peyton treated every class as if it were contract law. "Here he was, hammering away at his homework in seventh grade," says Cooper.





“I never once heard Peyton say, ‘I want to be a pro football player,’ ” says his mother. “It was always, ‘I want to play college football.’ ”

“I’m saying, ‘Relax, you don’t have to stay up till 1 a.m. over this math.’ ”

In the fall of 1991, Cooper and Peyton played their one season of football together, Peyton as Newman’s sophomore quarterback, Cooper as a senior wide receiver. “That year made us buddies,” Cooper says. Newman was 12–2. In the Louisiana Class 2A semifinals, against upstate power Haynesville, Newman lost 27–21 after Peyton was intercepted with 30 seconds to play. Cooper hung an arm around his little brother. Told him everything was fine.

In truth, everything was not fine. Cooper had played half the season with numbness in his right hand. He went to Oxford in August 1992, participated in two-a-days and even dressed for a game. But the numbness had spread to his right leg. Archie took Cooper to specialists, and in late September, Archie was told that his son had spinal stenosis, a congenital narrowing of the spinal cavity. Football was out of the question.

Archie and Olivia broke the news to Cooper on a Friday night in New Orleans. It is a subject that moves Peyton nearly to tears. Three days after Cooper was told of his condition, he went back to Oxford. Peyton had written him a short keep-your-chin-up note. And Cooper left Peyton a note that would help redefine their relationship. It said, in part:

I would like to live my dream of playing football through you. Although I cannot play anymore, I know I can still get the same feeling out of watching my little brother do what he does best. I know now that we are good for each other, because I need you to be serious and look at things from a different perspective. I am good for you, as well, to take things light. I love you, Peyt, and only great things lay ahead for you. Thanks for everything on and off the field.

In June 1993, Cooper had corrective spinal surgery that left him almost paralyzed. After the operation he had to relearn how to walk. His hands

had been quick and sure, but now he can’t have a serious game of catch. Cooper graduated from Ole Miss in four years then worked on Rebels coach Tommy Tuberville’s television show, taking a microphone into the audience like Phil Donahue. “I call him Mr. Oxford,” says Peyton of his brother.

Because of Cooper’s injury, Peyton began considering schools other than Ole Miss. Tennessee fit his needs best: It was in the South, it had a tradition of good quarterbacks and, most important, it had people with whom Peyton instantly connected—Cutcliffe in particular. When Peyton signed with the Volunteers, his parents got some vicious phone calls from Ole Miss fans, calls that hurt. Cooper, however, wore a Tennessee cap around the Ole Miss campus on the day of the signing, daring anybody to rip his brother.

The bond that Cooper’s letter to Peyton helped forge nearly four years ago has never been stronger. In their daydreams, Peyton sees defenses spread out before him and threads completions to Cooper through their soft spots; Cooper sees himself playing again. Each sees the other. “I always see us playing Georgia, in the daylight, always in the daylight,” says Cooper. “We’re driving down the field, the place is packed, Peyton hits me on a little post corner route. . . .”

“We’re both in Ole Miss uniforms, gray and red,” says Peyton. “I picture how it would have been. He comes into my dream, catching a pass. Then he throws the ball up into the stands. . . .” Touchdown! Touchdown, Ole Miss!

Father and son are sitting on a couch in the den of the Mannings’ yellow house in the Garden District of New Orleans. Archie is at one end, Peyton at the other, both of them signing footballs to be given away at a Newman function that weekend. They could be brothers, and in a sense that’s what they are. Brothers in history.

Yes, the game Peyton’s father knew has changed forever. Yes, Peyton will soon play for more money in a season than most men make in a lifetime. But this autumn can be the sweetest of all. “This fall,” says Peyton, “this fall could be something else.”

In this home there is a syrupy faith, a belief that history doesn’t die. “I’m telling you, college football is special,” says Archie.

He reaches to his left and pulls a new football from a box. He signs it and passes it to his right. Peyton scribbles his name on the ball and sets it gently on the coffee table. Archie reaches for another new football. Sunlight streams through long windows. The only noise is the squeak of a black marker against the fresh, pebbled leather. □



One More Time

In the spring of 1997, Peyton Manning was the presumed top pick in the draft—then he pulled off the ultimate misdirection

→ By Tim Layden

Photograph by
V.J. Lovero
For Sports Illustrated

A

AFTER HE ANNOUNCED his decision on March 5, 1997, this is what Peyton Manning heard most from people: “Congratulations.” That and, of course, “Thank you” from love-struck Tennessee football fans, shocked that Manning would return to quarterback their Volunteers for another autumn, when it seemed so certain he would leave for the NFL. Their ardor is understandable but—congratulations?

By electing to play a fourth season of college football instead of accepting many millions of dollars as the probable first pick in the 1997 NFL draft, Manning was perceived by many as seizing some high moral ground and planting his personal flag in it. One Knoxville television station even sent a crew to ask schoolchildren what they had learned from Manning’s virtuous choice.

Almost 36 hours after the news conference that stopped Tennesseans in their tracks, Manning drove his Oldsmobile Bravada through West Knoxville, passing under a huge, orange billboard that read THANK YOU PEYTON! The statewide canonization struck him as sweet but misplaced. “What I did is selfish,” said Manning. “I didn’t do it because it’s right for any other college athlete who has to make the same kind of decision. Michael Jordan, when I talked to him, told me to do what I want to do. That was the key word here:

NOT IN ANY RUSH

Manning went 28 of 49 for 341 yards and two touchdowns during an early-season visit to UCLA that resulted in a 30–24 win. It was the second of his six straight 300-plus-yard games to start the season.



want. And believe me, the decision was close.”

It was so close, in fact, that if an NFL coach or scout or personnel man had given Manning a clear evaluation of whether his skills were NFL-ready, Tennessee might be sizing up sophomore Tamaurice (Tee) Martin or junior Jermaine Copeland as starting quarterback. If Manning had only heard from somebody like Broncos offensive coordinator Gary Kubiak, who told SI before Manning’s announcement, “I think he’s phenomenal. He makes every throw. His mechanics are second to none. He runs the no-huddle flawlessly. I told [Denver coach] Mike Shanahan, ‘If the Jets [who have the first pick] get this kid, they’re going to turn it around in a hurry.’”

But the NFL strongly discourages teams from pursuing or even commenting on an underclassman until the player has declared for the draft. The league takes great pride in shielding underclassmen—a ridiculous classification in Manning’s case; he has played 36 games and should graduate on May 16 with a 3.53 GPA and a degree in speech communications—from the knowledge that would help them make an informed decision. Former NFL quarterback Archie Manning, Peyton’s father-friend-adviser and about as connected as anyone when it comes to football, turned over a cartload of rocks looking for information and didn’t find enough to satisfy Peyton. “I’ll tell you,” said Archie, “the league stands up on that promise about juniors.”

Peyton found a staggering list of people on the fringe to consult. There was not only Jordan but also former NFL luminaries Hank Stram, Fran Tarkenton, Roger Staubach (“Peyton, it was an honor to win the Heisman,” he said, “but it didn’t make me a better NFL player. Please do not go back just to win that”) and Phil Simms (“I watched your bowl game, and I know you’re ready,” Simms said, making a 180-degree turn from last fall, when he told Archie that Peyton should stay four years).

He quizzed current NFL quarterbacks Troy Aikman (“I’ve seen you a lot on television. I think you’re ready”), Drew Bledsoe (“Peyton, pro football is the best job in the world, because you’re playing football and that’s all you have to concentrate on”) and Rick Mirer (“I wouldn’t trade my last year at Notre Dame for anything”).

Just 11 days before his announcement, Manning was in Charlottesville, Va., visiting his longtime girlfriend, Ashley Thompson, a se-



“I need to get to the NFL,” said Manning. “I can’t wait to get there, and I want that challenge. But I want it with every bit of ammunition I’ve got.”

nior at Virginia. The Wake Forest basketball team was in town to play the Cavaliers, so Manning visited with Demon Deacons senior center Tim Duncan, who has twice bypassed the NBA draft and might have been the No. 1 pick a year ago.

Manning: “I’m going through a tough decision. I could use a little advice.”

Duncan: “What pick will you be?”

Manning: “From what I understand, first.”

Duncan (eyebrows raised): “O.K., how close are you to your degree?”

Manning: “I graduate in May.”

Duncan: “What are you asking me for? What’s the advice?”

AT THE end of his quest Manning found that only Mirer supported the idea of staying at Tennessee. Manning had assumed since early fall that he was playing his last season of college football, yet as he wrapped up his research, he felt a creeping uncertainty. The argument to go pro still seemed unconvincing and incomplete. "Aikman said I was ready, Simms said I was ready, and I valued their opinions," said Manning. "But I got no clear-cut evaluation from an NFL coach. In a lot of ways, I wanted that. I don't care what Mel Kiper Jr. says. Maybe the NFL people were scared because they're not supposed to give that stuff out. I don't know. But as my decision got closer, I started imagining myself at some NFL training camp, throwing from the five-step drop. I've heard in the pros that with the five-step, it's, Five steps, make a move around a rusher, then throw and still not be late. What if I got out there and I just hadn't done it enough times and I was late? I'd be thinking, Damn, I'm not ready. I should have stayed. Maybe I did need one more year."

Then there is a long pause. Manning knows some people suspect that he's afraid to take the challenge of the NFL, that he's like some delicate child, swaddled in the cocoon of college football, that he left more on the table than any underclassman, ever, out of fear. That's a wild misperception. Manning is a savage competitor, and if he once thought of college football as the final rung on his ladder, that's surely no longer the case. "I need to get into the NFL," said Manning. "I can't wait to get there, and I want that challenge. But I want it with every bit of ammunition I've got. When I came to Tennessee, I attacked the job. Well, I promise you, come next January 2 or 3, I'm going to attack the NFL. Drew Bledsoe told me that no matter when I came out, I was going to struggle in my rookie year. I believe I'll struggle less by staying here this year, playing with the bullets flying. And I have every intention of being in exactly the same draft position next year."

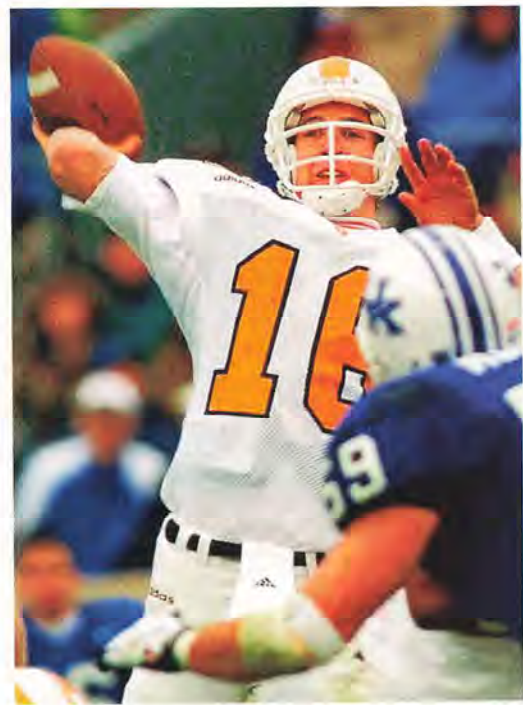
One other silly perception: Manning hasn't given due thought to the possibility of a career-ending injury, which would cost him those millions. Manning's older brother Cooper's football career was ended with the discovery of a congenital spinal condition when he was a freshman at Mississippi in '92. "With what happened to Cooper," said Peyton, "I've counted every day of football since my junior year in high school as lucky."

His decision to stay at Tennessee evolved into an uncomplicated matter, if not a painless one. College football is what he knows, and the NFL remained a great unknown. Peyton Manning does not do unknowns. He would sooner play Florida helmetless than venture forward unprepared.



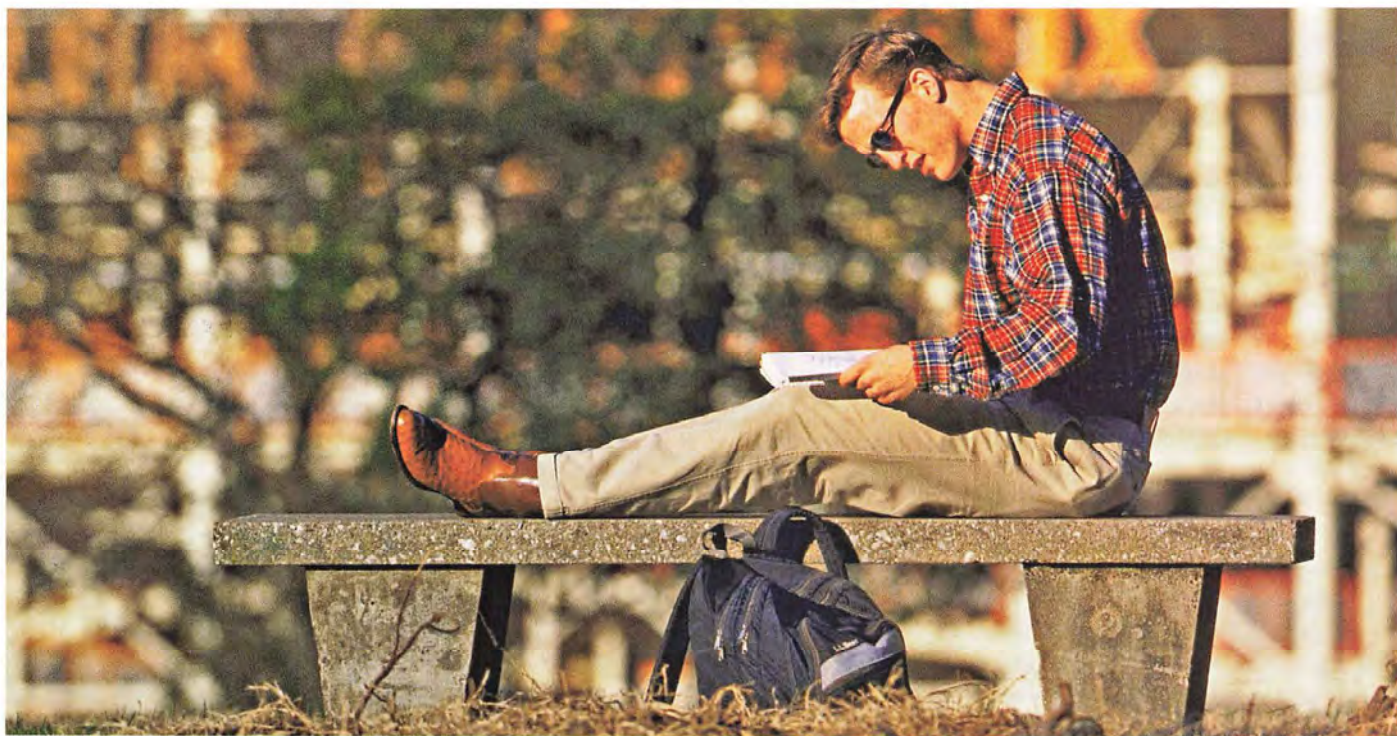
STAY AND PLAY

Manning thrilled UT fans when he said he would stay (left) and excited them further by throwing for 399 yards and four TDs against Southern Mississippi (above) and 523 and five against Kentucky.



"I have the opportunity to do this," he said. "I'm entitled to play four years, so I'm going to."

His return makes Tennessee, with 15 starters back from last season's 10-2 team, an SEC and national-championship contender again. "Those are team goals, sure, but they're not why I came back," Manning said. "I'm ready for anything." He can feel his arm getting stronger every day and, through special drills, feel his feet getting quicker too. He's edging closer to the 225 pounds (on a 6' 5½" frame) and the 4.7



in the 40 that seemed so unrealistic when he was a frail freshman. Moreover, coach Philip Fulmer met with the Mannings, seeking small ways to make him more comfortable if he stayed. Subtle changes could result, in everything from the Vols' offensive philosophy to better management of Manning's public appearances, which tended to break down into hero-worshipping autograph sessions.

But the bottom line was, he couldn't shake the advice that not just Jordan but also every other celebrity he spoke to offered: You do what you want to do. Manning rolled that one around in his brain and heart. "I want to be around [senior wideout] Marcus Nash for a few more months," Manning said. "I want to walk to class and hear people say, 'Good luck in the game.' I want to see

AMATEUR HOURS

Manning wanted to perfect his game before heading to the NFL, but he also really liked being a college student. And Tennessee fans certainly made him feel welcome.

that little orange section in the stands at road games. I really do. I want to tailgate with my parents after the games and then go out to dinner. I don't know if you tailgate in the NFL, but we've been doing it for three years here, and I want to do it for one more."

Manning also vowed to tap the brakes, to bring the superstar collegian, pro-in-waiting bandwagon nearer the speed limit. He started taking classes in the summer before his freshman season and loaded up academically with such gusto that he will be finished in three years. "He's just piled all this school on, such a rush job," says Cooper. "It's been all hurry up and do this and do that." At 20 years old Peyton found himself throwing with an NFL-issue football and honing his seven-step drop for the pros when it seemed he had just left high school. Rush job, indeed.

For his fourth year on campus he will take a light load of graduate courses. "I'm not going to kill myself," Manning said. "I'm going to really be able to concentrate on football and enjoy it."

Two days after his announcement, he showed up for a 6 a.m. off-season running and weightlifting session. "Could have been the first guy in the draft, and he's here at six," said strength coach John Stucky.

"I was 50 pounds lighter after the decision," said Manning. Now he can be in Nash's August wedding. Now he can take a jab at Virginia Tech quarterback Jim Druckenmiller, whom Manning saw quoted as ridiculing his indecision and who is now sure to be enriched by Manning's absence from the draft. "Jim Druckenmiller owes me a cold beverage," Manning said. Now he can play in Gainesville again. And now he can truly be ready for the NFL in a year. He walked from the football complex into the cool morning air with two game tapes in his right hand. College game tapes. *Tap, tap.* □

Last Pass

After Manning & Co. pulled off a stirring 30-29 victory over Auburn in the SEC title game, he had his ailing brother on his mind

→ By Tim Layden

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
December 15, 1997

THE PILE grew at Peyton Manning's feet, as jersey, pads, shoes, wristbands dropped into a pungent heap in front of his dressing stool. Then he paused and smiled crookedly. "I knew we would win," he said, long after Tennessee's 30-29 victory over Auburn in the SEC championship game in Atlanta and long after the celebration that followed. He knew when the Volunteers fell behind 20-7 in the second quarter and 27-17 late in the third? "If we stayed calm, I knew we would win this game," Manning repeated. Believe it. Patience isn't just a virtue for the Vols of the Manning era, it's a necessity.

For three years Tennessee has seen its season seemingly destroyed by early-season losses to Florida. Yet for three years Tennessee has run the rest of the SEC table to keep its slim hopes for a conference championship alive. Credit for such perseverance goes to coach Phillip Fulmer, who despite an overall record of 54-10 has been sliced up by Vols fans for falling to the Gators for five straight years. Two years ago Tennessee blew a 30-14 lead to Florida and disintegrated in a 62-37 loss. The next morning Fulmer told his staff, "This is going to be the best week of practice we've ever had." Indeed, the Volunteers' workouts were exceptional that week. They would set the tone for the recovery that would follow—and that would remain an indelible experience for the many current starters who were sophomores then.

This season, nine days after losing to Florida 33-20 on Sept. 20 (Tennessee had a bye the next week), the same Vols, seniors now, convened a players-only meeting and implored their teammates to hold together. "Keep the faith," Manning remembers saying that day. "Things can happen." Things did happen. Florida lost to LSU and Georgia, and now Tennessee, which remained No. 3 in both polls after the squeaker over Auburn, has its first conference title since 1990. The Volunteers

will play Nebraska in the Orange Bowl with a shot at the national championship should top-ranked Michigan fall in the Rose Bowl.

In his final SEC game, Manning threw for 373 yards and four touchdowns. This came at the end of a 12-day period during which he was often preoccupied with the condition of his 24-year-old brother, Cooper, who, two days after watching Tennessee's Nov. 22 victory over Kentucky, underwent emergency spinal surgery to relieve worsening numbness in his left side from a congenital condition that ended his football career.

Cooper watched the Auburn game at home in New Orleans with his younger brother, Eli. At halftime he talked by phone with his mother, Olivia, who was at the Georgia Dome. "What's [Tennessee's] problem?" he shouted despite his discomfort. The other Mannings hope Cooper can travel to New York City this weekend for the Heisman Trophy ceremony, in which Peyton is one of four finalists. If not, his presence will be felt nonetheless. "Cooper and I were together out there tonight," said Peyton after the win over Auburn. "We're always together." □

TIGER KILLER

Manning threw for 373 yards and four touchdowns to engineer a comeback from 13 down and set up an Orange Bowl matchup with Nebraska.







1



2



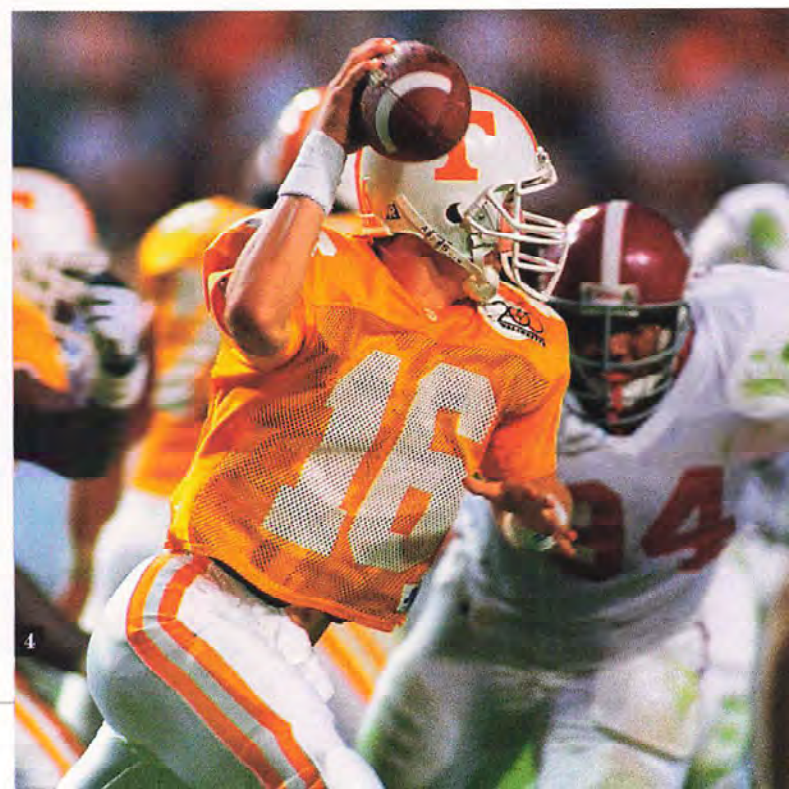
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THE VOLS YEARS

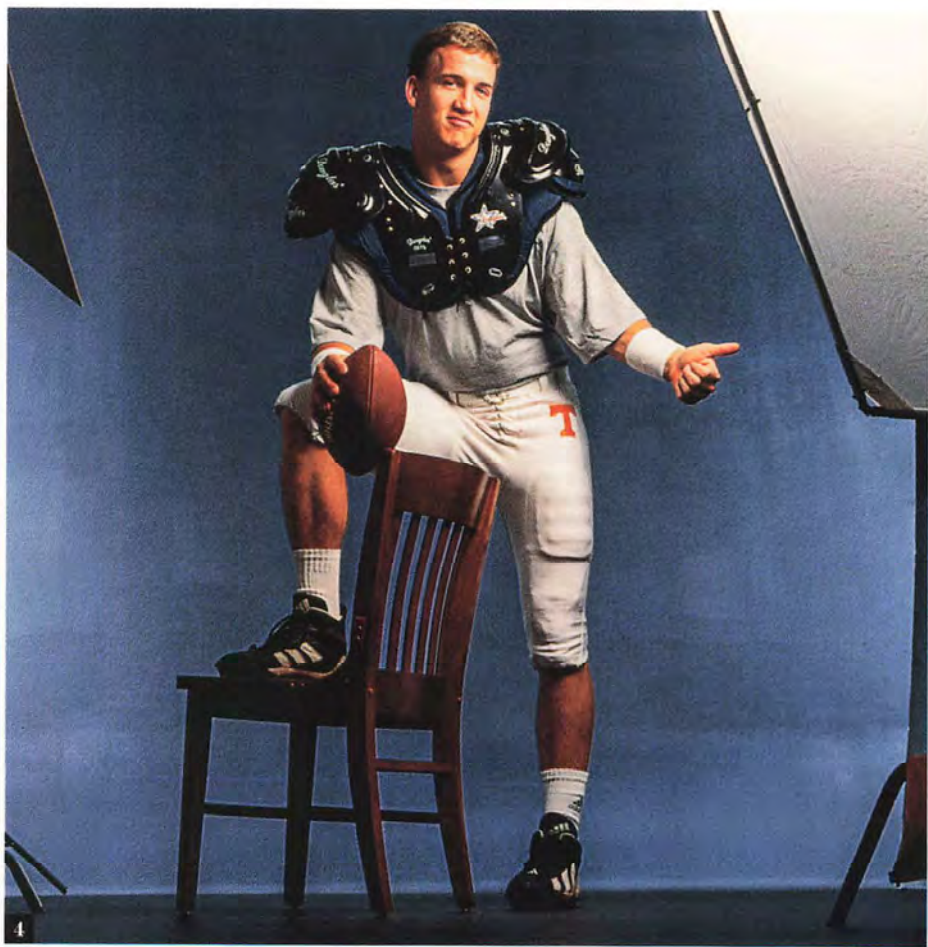
1. Conducting yet another rendition of "Rocky Top" after his final win in orange.
2. Congratulating 1997 Heisman winner Charles Woodson as Randy Moss and Ryan Leaf look on.
3. The fans volunteer their best wishes.
4. In his third start, Manning fell to the Tide, 17-13. Over his four years in Knoxville he started 45 games, accumulating 39 wins along the way.



BOB ROSATO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (1);
ADAM NADEL/AP (2); PATRICK MURPHY-
RACEY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (3);
RICK STEWART FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (4)



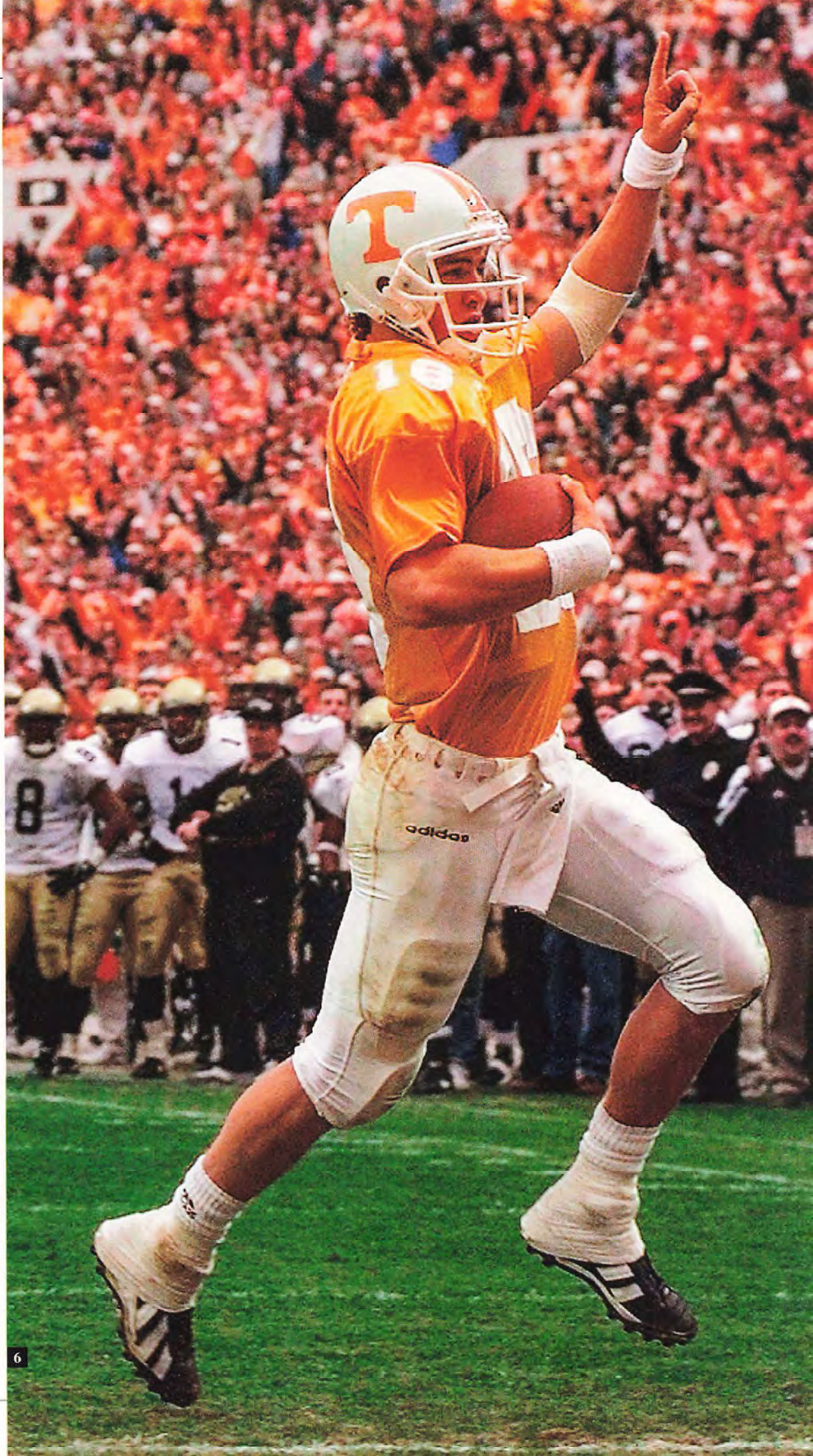
4



THE VOLS YEARS

1. Manning never shied away from the bright lights and played some of his best games when the stakes were highest.
2. Pumping up in 1997.
3. Graduation day: Manning needed only three years to earn a degree in speech communications with a 3.61 GPA.
4. Thumbing through a photo session for SI's 1998 draft preview.
5. On the front stoop in New Orleans with Eli, who was still in high school, for a 1996 photo shoot.
6. Manning was never a speedster, but in the early days he was mobile enough to run one in during a 17-10 win over Vanderbilt.

AL TIELEMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (1); BILL FRANKS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (2); PATRICK MURPHY-RACEY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (3, 5); PETER READ MILLER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (4); MARK HUMPHREY/AP (6)





THE VOL YEARS

In Manning's final start, Tennessee had a shot at the national championship if it beat Nebraska and if Michigan lost in the Rose Bowl. Unfortunately, the Wolverines beat Washington State and the Vols lost to the Huskers, 42-17.





Dome Sweet Dome

He arrived in the NFL as a No. 1 pick born and bred to be QB royalty—and Peyton Manning exceeded even those lofty expectations. Indy got more than a franchise icon and its first Super Bowl win. Manning became the greatest athlete in the city's history



INDIAN



Photograph by
Michael Hickey
Getty Images

INDY ARTIST

Manning (here in 2006)
turned the RCA Dome—and
later Lucas Oil Stadium—
into Peyton's place.

APOLIS





Growing Pains

Peyton Manning showed flashes of brilliance in his NFL debut, but his inexperience led to a victory for the Dolphins

→ **By Marty Burns**

Photograph by
Damian Strohmeyer
For Sports Illustrated

P

EYTON MANNING'S blue jersey with the white number 18 was soaked with sweat, and his eyes were moist with tears as he made his way off the RCA Dome turf. The Colts' rookie quarterback didn't seem to hear the cheers raining down on him from the stands, and he barely noticed when coach Jim Mora gently patted him on the back as they walked together to the locker room. The day Manning had been waiting for since he first picked up a football as a kid turned out to be a disappointment.

Sure, he'd completed 21 of 37 passes for 302 yards, a productive debut by any standards, but his team had lost to the Dolphins 24-15, and he'd thrown three interceptions, including one that cornerback Terrell Buckley returned 21 yards for a game-clinching touchdown. "Anytime you lose, it's no fun," Manning said later. "I made some mistakes. Hopefully I'll learn from them."

For now Colts fans will have to sit tight as the 22-year-old Manning, who went first in the 1998 draft and signed the richest rookie contract in NFL history—a six-year deal that could earn him almost \$48 million—learns his trade. If this first game is any indication, the ride is going to be wilder than a spin around the old Brickyard. Facing a tough defense, Manning displayed poise, confidence and a passing touch seldom seen in a young quarterback, but his inexperience clearly hurt his team.

ROUGH START

The Dolphins put the squeeze on Manning and forced three interceptions, including one that was returned for a game-clinching touchdown.



Miami coach Jimmy Johnson resisted the urge to load his defensive game plan with trick schemes and blitz packages. "My philosophy is not to change what you do because of any guy on the other side of the ball," he said. But Johnson challenged Manning in critical situations, and the rookie usually read the defense and adjusted well.

"Pretty much every time we showed blitz, he checked out of it," Dolphins defensive end Trace Armstrong said. "He made a lot of good plays, a lot of great calls. You can tell the guy is going to be a great quarterback." Indeed, Manning was brilliant at times. In the second quarter he beat a blitz to hit wideout Marvin Harrison for a 42-yard gain that set up the Colts' first field goal, and in the third quarter

Miami coach Jimmy Johnson challenged Manning in critical situations, and the rookie usually read the defense and adjusted well.

LONG DAY

The 22-year-old Manning, who had signed the richest rookie contract in NFL history, was in no mood to discuss his bright future after the frustrating loss to Miami.

he scooted out of the pocket and unleashed a 32-yard pass to tight end Marcus Pollard before being slammed to the turf by defensive tackle Daryl Gardener.

At other times, though, Manning appeared overwhelmed. His first interception occurred in the second quarter, with Indianapolis deep in its own territory and trailing 10-3. As he stepped to the line, Manning recognized a blitz and called an audible for a slant pass to Harrison. Buckley read the play and jumped in front of Harrison when he made his cut. As Buckley returned the ball for 12 yards, Manning looked on helplessly, and his father, former Saints quarterback Archie Manning, seated in the stands a few rows up, hung his head.

Although Manning's second interception was a fluke—the pass glanced off running back Mar-



shall Faulk's pads and into Gardener's hands—his third was a doozy. Indianapolis was trailing 17-9 and backed up to its three-yard line with 1:32 remaining when Manning forced another slant pass to Harrison. The throw was off target, and Buckley snared it and took it into the end zone untouched. As Manning endures growing pains, the Colts are trying to keep the fans' high expectations from consuming him. President Bill Polian, who was with the Bills when Jim Kelly arrived to great fanfare, has made sure the team doesn't overpublicize Manning. In fact, murals hanging outside the RCA Dome feature Faulk and defensive back Jason Belser, not the hotshot rookie. Manning, meanwhile, has turned down offers to have his own local TV and radio shows.

As bright as his future may be, Manning didn't want to hear about it after his debut. When he had changed out of his uniform and into a pair of brown slacks and a white golf shirt, he met his father outside the locker room. Peyton wore a look of disappointment on his face, and it remained there even as Archie put an arm around his shoulder and they walked out of the building together. □

Off the Schneid

It took six years, four tries and one of the best performances of his career, but in 2004, Manning finally got his first playoff win

By Michael Silver

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
January 12, 2004

THE CHILD closed her eyes late in the third quarter, unruffled by the din inside the RCA Dome. By the time six-year-old Quisha James fell asleep on the lap of Ashley Manning, their loved ones had helped turn a highly anticipated playoff clash between Indianapolis and Denver into a snoozer.

"Man, I thought it was going to be a game," Quisha's father, Colts running back Edgerrin James, said later. "But things got kind of boring in the second half, and I guess my little girl checked out."

All over America grown-ups in Barcaloungers had a similar reaction. After AFC South champion Indianapolis rolled to a 41-10 victory over wild-card Denver, it was time to remove the label of postseason patsy from Indy. That was also true for James, All-Pro wideout Marvin Harrison, coach Tony Dungy (who broke a four-game playoff losing streak) and, most of all, quarterback Peyton Manning, whose can't-win-the-big-game burden had felt a thousand times heavier than the child sleeping on his wife's lap. "When you're the quarterback and you've got an 0-3 record in the playoffs, there's a lot of pressure on you," Manning conceded after the game. "You work all year for another chance, and it would have been really, really frustrating not to change all that."

In the best game of his six-year career—hell, in the best game of almost anyone's career—Manning was composed, confident and in command. He connected on

22 of 26 passes for 377 yards (327 by halftime) and five touchdowns, delighting 56,586 fans and sending the Colts into a divisional playoff with the equally explosive Chiefs.

Indy's Big Three of Manning, James and Harrison often have fantasized during their five seasons together about starring on a grander stage. A few weeks ago during a practice, Manning called James and Harrison aside to offer up his latest dream Super Bowl scenario: third-and-one, Manning play-fakes to James and runs a bootleg around right end, then hurdles a defender. But several others converge, and at the last second Manning laterals to Harrison, who scores the winning touchdown.

"You're crazy, P," Harrison said.

On Friday, Jan. 2, Manning learned he'd been voted the NFL's co-MVP, along with Titans quarterback Steve McNair, and arrived home to find a celebratory cake decorated by his wife. ("She left off the 'co-' part," Peyton noted.) "In the 10 years I've known him," Ashley

said, "I've never seen him so relaxed before a game."

Manning was even looser during the action, throwing the first of two scoring passes to slot receiver Brandon Stokley on Indy's first drive and producing points on the Colts' first seven possessions. So spellbound were the Broncos' defenders that several of them simply stood around after Harrison's diving catch at the Denver 30 late in the first quarter. Still untouched after several seconds, Harrison got up and sprinted to the end zone.

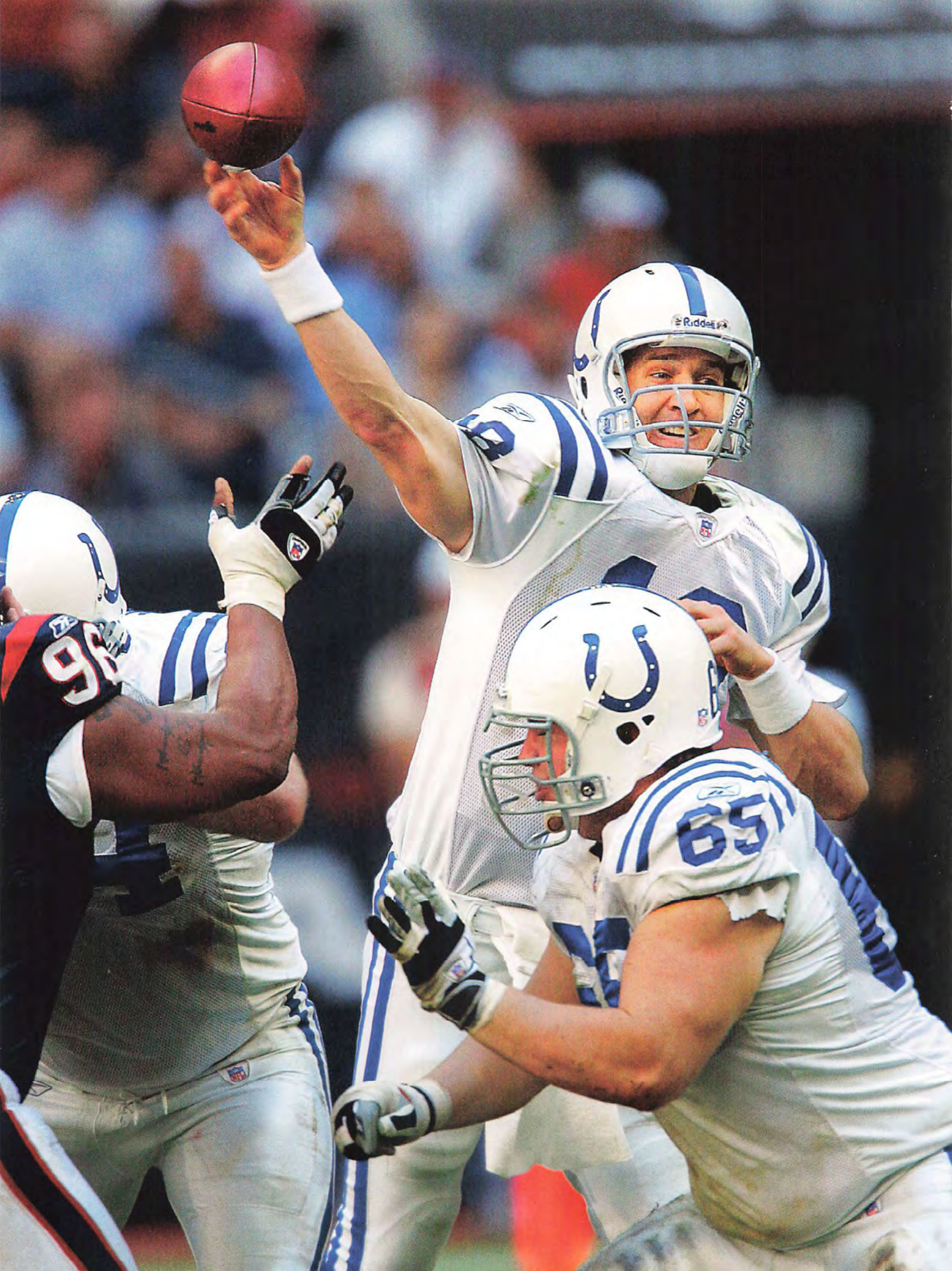
By the time the Broncos realized their mistake, they—and Quisha—were well on their way to slumberland. □



WORTH WATCHING

After diving for a Manning pass in the first quarter, Harrison (88) ran past several idling Broncos for a TD.







From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
December 20, 2004

Passing Marks

By his seventh NFL season, Peyton Manning was already on the cusp of a hallowed record held for 20 years by one of his biggest idols

→ **By Michael Silver**

Photograph by
Peter Read Miller
For Sports Illustrated

D

OWNSTAIRS IN Peyton Manning's house, where the world's hottest quarterback regularly hosts parties for teammates after Colts home games, it's tough to take two steps without stumbling upon an exceptionally cool memento. Near the bar there's the large wicker basket overflowing with game balls; the *Caddyshack* poster signed by the film's stars is in the home theater (used exclusively, alas, for watching game video); and in the weight room a wall is lined with framed photographs of the proprietor

schmoozing with some of football's most recognizable faces.

"It's my Quarterback Wall," Manning proudly explained as he surveyed a cast of majestic passers that includes Johnny Unitas, Brett Favre and Michael Vick. Then, pointing to a shot of his father, Archie, the longtime New Orleans Saint, standing next to a young, excessively tan and bushy-haired Dan Marino in a Dolphins uniform, Peyton lowered his voice to a reverential tone and added, "This one right here's my favorite. My dad, of course, was my idol, but when he retired in 1984, I needed a new favorite player, and Marino kind of took over." The photo was snapped hours before an '86 game between the Dolphins and the Saints at the Superdome when Archie, then a radio broadcaster for the home team, walked onto the field with his second-oldest son to say hello to Dan the Man. Peyton, who was 10, remembers everything

CLOSING IN

In December 2004, Manning tossed two TDs against the Texans to give him 46 for the season—two short of Marino's record—with three games to play.



about the interaction, most notably the “big ol’ Skoal can Marino was holding.”

Now chew on this: No NFL passer, not even the great Marino, has had as productive a season as Manning’s magical 2004 campaign seems destined to turn out. On Dec. 12, at Reliant Stadium, Manning threw a pair of first-quarter touchdown passes to lead Indianapolis to a 23–14 victory over the Texans, giving him 46 for the year—two shy of the single-season record Marino set in 1984. With their sixth consecutive victory the Colts (10–3) clinched a second straight AFC South title, meaning the most suspenseful story line heading into their home game against the Ravens is if and when one of football’s most hallowed milestones will be surpassed.

Or matched. “I’m telling you, it would be kind of neat to tie it,” said Manning, who completed 26 of 33 passes for 298 yards against the Texans (5–8). “People don’t understand the respect I have for Marino. But I think if I got to 48 and shut it down, our receivers would be out there changing plays for me.”

You can bet that the ball Manning tosses for TD number 49 will be displayed more prominently than those in the wicker basket. Of course, first there is the small matter of retrieving it from whoever makes the historic catch. “We’ve been talking about selling it on eBay,” running back Edgerrin James said while dining with four teammates at

Mouthing Off

From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
January 20, 2002

LIPREADING IS a feverish topic in the NFL these days. Coaches are covering their mouths when they send in plays because they’re suspicious that thieves are watching. The coaches look like they had onions for lunch or just graduated from the Istanbul Spy Institute. To check it out, I hired three lip-readers, all women, all football fans and all either hearing impaired or profoundly deaf, to come by the house last weekend.

The first game was the Colts’ easy win over the Broncos, and the one guy who should’ve covered his mouth was quarterback Peyton Manning. He’s Dudley Do-Right in public, but on the field Manning seems to have the vocabulary of a dyspeptic carnival employee. The lip-readers counted nine f---s, many dammits and, once, just for variety’s sake, a f-----’ dammit!

In the first quarter, after a replay had overturned an apparent touchdown pass to wide receiver Marvin Harrison, Manning was seen to say, “Why’d they show the f-----’ replay?” When a running back short-armed his screen pass, he yelled, “F-----’ get in there!”

After the game, when our correspondent went to the locker room and told Manning the lip-readers had nailed him, Manning took the stringer’s cellphone and called me.

“They got me, huh?” he said, dejectedly.

“Nine times,” I said.

“Man, I don’t like to use that kind of language. I hate for the kids to see that stuff. But you forget the camera is on you, you know? My mother is going to call and reprimand me for that.” —Rick Reilly

GOOD COMPANY

Manning set another record against Houston: He had his 13th straight game with at least two TD passes, breaking the NFL mark shared by Marino, Unitas, Favre and Meredith.

These are giddy times for the Colts, who, despite a season-low scoring output against the Texans, remain on pace to surpass the record 556 points produced by the 1998 Vikings. Not only is Manning, at 28, playing at an uncharted level, but Indy's other skill-position players have also stepped up their games. James, in his third year removed from major knee surgery, is back to his All-Pro form—he had 104 yards on 28 carries against the Texans, giving him 1,395 for the season, and added seven catches for 54 yards. Star wideout Marvin Harrison, who last week signed a seven-year, \$67 million contract extension, now gets significant help from Wayne, slot receiver Brandon Stokley and tight ends Marcus Pollard and Dallas Clark.

"This is a once-in-a-career kind of situation," Colts coach Tony Dungy says. "Everything is falling into place for us—the way Peyton's playing and the weaponry we have. It's not so much the passes he's throwing as the way he's running the offense and the decisions he's making."

Sitting in the club seats outside

a downtown Indianapolis restaurant. "I'll tell you this—if he's at 48 and I get a little swing pass, I'm going in punt-return mode and taking that thing to the crib."

"If it's me," wideout Reggie Wayne chimed in, "I'm gonna drift all the way across the field and put my hand up, like P-Dub [Peter Warrick] used to do at Florida State, and then be gone."



Manning worships quarterbacks and is especially awed by Marino because of the unmatched consistency displayed by the future Hall of Famer.

of suite 279 at Reliant Stadium, Colts owner Jim Irsay was equally effusive in his praise of the seventh-year veteran. "Success comes from hard work and preparation, but sometimes you're blessed, and the stars seem to align," Irsay said. "I remember the last Sunday of the '97 season. Arizona was down 12 [to the Atlanta Falcons] with eight or nine minutes to go, and I was thinking, Well, it looks like we're going to have the second pick of the draft. Then they come back, and with five seconds left Jake Plummer throws a touchdown pass to win it and give us the first pick, and I just went berserk. The kids came running in saying, 'What is wrong with Dad?'"

As Irsay spoke, Manning was in the process of directing his second touchdown drive in the game's first 11 minutes, giving Indy a 14-0 lead. Twice Manning went to his first read for scores: On third-and-goal from the three the Colts lined up with an empty backfield, and Manning noticed outside linebacker Kailee Wong in single coverage against Harrison. Practically scoffing at a weakside blitz, Manning turned to his right

and zipped the ball to Harrison for a 7-0 lead.

Later, on second-and-five from the Houston 12, Manning called 6 R Slant Inside and looked for the ever-improving Wayne (seven catches, 96 yards), who lined up to the left, slipped inside of rookie cornerback Dunta Robinson and flashed open while cutting across the front of the end zone. "The safety [Glenn Earl] was on the inside and was looking at Reggie," Manning said. "He was so concerned with not looking into the backfield—which happens a lot—that I was able to throw the ball right past his ear before he knew what hit him."

Like that, one of Marino's records went out the window: It was Manning's 13th consecutive game with at least two touchdown tosses, breaking an NFL mark shared by Marino, Unitas, Favre and Don Meredith. Manning worships quarterbacks in general and is especially awed by Marino because of the unmatched consistency displayed by the future first-ballot Hall of Famer. The two faced off four times before Marino retired in March 2000—Manning went 1-3—and last February in South Florida they became playing partners on the golf course. "I went down there to play in his tournament, and I wanted to hide out for a few days afterward while my contract was being worked out," Manning says. "Dan told me I could stay in his guesthouse. Some people feel you can be too old to have heroes, but I'm 28, and I don't think so."

So, while Manning was in the midst of becoming the NFL's richest man (ultimately signing a seven-year, \$98 million contract extension with a record \$34.5 million signing bonus), he really got in touch with his inner fan. Call it the M&M Show: Though Manning never serenaded Marino's wife, Claire, with chants of "Cut that meat," the signature line from his funny MasterCard commercial, he thoroughly enjoyed his stay in Casa Marino. The two quarterbacks played rounds of golf at elite courses, sipped vintage red wine and had a grand old time.

"My kids just loved sitting around with him talking after dinner," Marino recalls. "They're Peyton Manning fans. [Around me] he wasn't nervous or anything like that. Or if he was, I didn't notice it. He's cool."

The same can't necessarily be said about Manning's receivers in 2004. "Things are tense," James acknowledges. "When you do get the ball, you know you have to do something with it because you might not see it for a while. Somebody's going to be mad



every week; it's just a question of who."

Earlier this year Harrison was frustrated by his lack of involvement, at one point voicing his displeasure to ABC's Michele Tafoya in an off-camera interview. Having caught an NFL-record 143 passes in 2002, Harrison (three catches on Sunday, 70 for the season) has seen a steady reduction in opportunities as Manning has grown more comfortable with Wayne, Stokley and Clark. "I know it's been an adjustment for Marvin," Manning said. "Hey, it's a good thing we don't huddle, because otherwise I'd hear a lot of griping from everyone." Then, gesturing to his Labradors, Manning added, "Colt and Rookie here are my two favorite receivers because they don't talk back."

The quarterback laughed, then predicted that the touchdown-pass record might not come as easily as people expect it will. "I'm telling you, it's hard to throw for a touchdown, and I have a feeling it's going to get harder," he said. "I think defenses are going to start dropping everybody into coverage in the red zone, thinking, He's not getting the record on us. And I'm telling you, if they do, I'll hand it off to Edgerrin every single play. It'll make you sick how much we'll run it if they dare us to. Heck, I'll call a quarterback draw."

After getting burned on the first two drives, Texans defensive coordinator Vic Fangio changed up coverages, mixing in man-to-man schemes behind the Texans' usual zones. "They threw a lot of junk at us," Wayne said, "and that's what we're going to get the rest of the way—junk."

It all looked good enough to Manning, who left the locker room nearly an hour after the game with a black 2004 AFC SOUTH CHAMPIONS hat on his head and a huge grin on his face. He emerged from a tunnel and slowly walked across the field with his wife, Ashley, his older brother, Cooper, and the only quarterback he worships more than Marino. It had been a bittersweet day for Archie and the Manning family—Peyton's younger brother, Eli, the Giants' rookie quarterback, had played miserably in a 37-14 loss to the Ravens—but this had been another memorable moment in an extraordinary season.

As Irsay, the admiring owner, had said earlier, "To do the things Peyton's been doing week in and week out, it's kind of like when a Bob Dylan comes along—you don't see someone like that very often."

Blame it on a simple twist of fate. □

"We've got Peyton Manning"

The Colts' quarterback has an indomitable will to win, a lesson the Jets learned the hard way

→ By Lee Jenkins

FROM SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
February 1, 2010

A

ARCHIE MANNING stood on the edge of the Colts' locker room, players acknowledging him with nods and handshakes and weary smiles, and he was reminded of Big Chevy. Fifteen years ago, in a game that only fathers and diehards would recall,

Peyton Manning rallied the Tennessee Volunteers from a 15-point deficit at Kentucky on a day when you could smell an upset in the air. As Archie waited for his son outside the locker room after that game, he was approached by a Vols offensive lineman named Jeff Smith, who weighed 305 pounds—hence the name Big Chevy. "Mr. Manning," Big Chevy told Archie, "he just wouldn't let us lose." For all the praise that has been heaped on Peyton Manning in the past decade and a half, that tribute somehow sticks to the ribs. "I think about it a lot," Archie said, "on nights like this."

Late second quarter, down 11 points, leaks in the offensive line, blitzers in the backfield, the No. 1 receiver smothered, the running game unreliable, the Super Bowl





at stake and the mood in the Manning suite at Lucas Oil Stadium "tense," said Peyton's older brother, Cooper, "very tense." Down on the field Peyton flashed back to another AFC championship game, three years earlier, when Indy trailed the Patriots by 18 at the same point. Since that decisive pivot from the brink, the Colts have developed a taste for suspense. This season they won seven games in which they were trailing in the fourth quarter. Maybe that's why they didn't panic in this AFC title game against the Jets—or maybe it's because, as linebacker Clint Session pointed out, "we've got Peyton Manning."

It's been only three years since Manning had to endure the most tired refrain in sports: Can he win the big one? The idea is laughable now. The better question after Indy's 30-17 victory is, Can he lose it? Manning prepared for his latest big one by studying a game between the Colts and the Ravens from 2005, when Jets coach Rex Ryan was Baltimore's defensive coordinator. But Manning was taken aback when the Jets came out in their nickel package instead of their base 3-4 and stayed with five, six or even seven defensive backs for much of the game. Colts offensive coordinator Tom Moore kept calling running plays to counter the extra DBs, but Manning repeatedly switched to passes. By the time he hit rookie receiver Austin Collie on a sublime 46-yard seam route with 1:19 left in the first half—Collie was sandwiched between two Jets defenders, so the pass had to be high enough to clear Drew Coleman's fingertips, low enough for Collie to box out Kerry Rhodes—it became apparent why Manning was calling

BLUE STREAK

Manning connected with Garçon (85) an AFC title-game record 11 times before sharing a victorious embrace with his father (below).



goal. "I saw Peyton give Garçon a little extra signal," Eli said, "so I had a feeling he would go to him there."

Though Peyton won't be playing against Eli, it will feel like the Manning Bowl given the family's investment in both sides. Archie and his wife, Olivia, remained in New Orleans after his playing career with the Saints and raised their three boys in the Garden District. When New Orleans quarterback Drew Brees arrived in the city four years ago, Archie and Olivia helped him find his first house. But blood is thicker than anything served on Bourbon Street. Asked if his loyalties might be divided, Archie didn't hesitate. "Not even close," he said. "I'm rooting for my son."

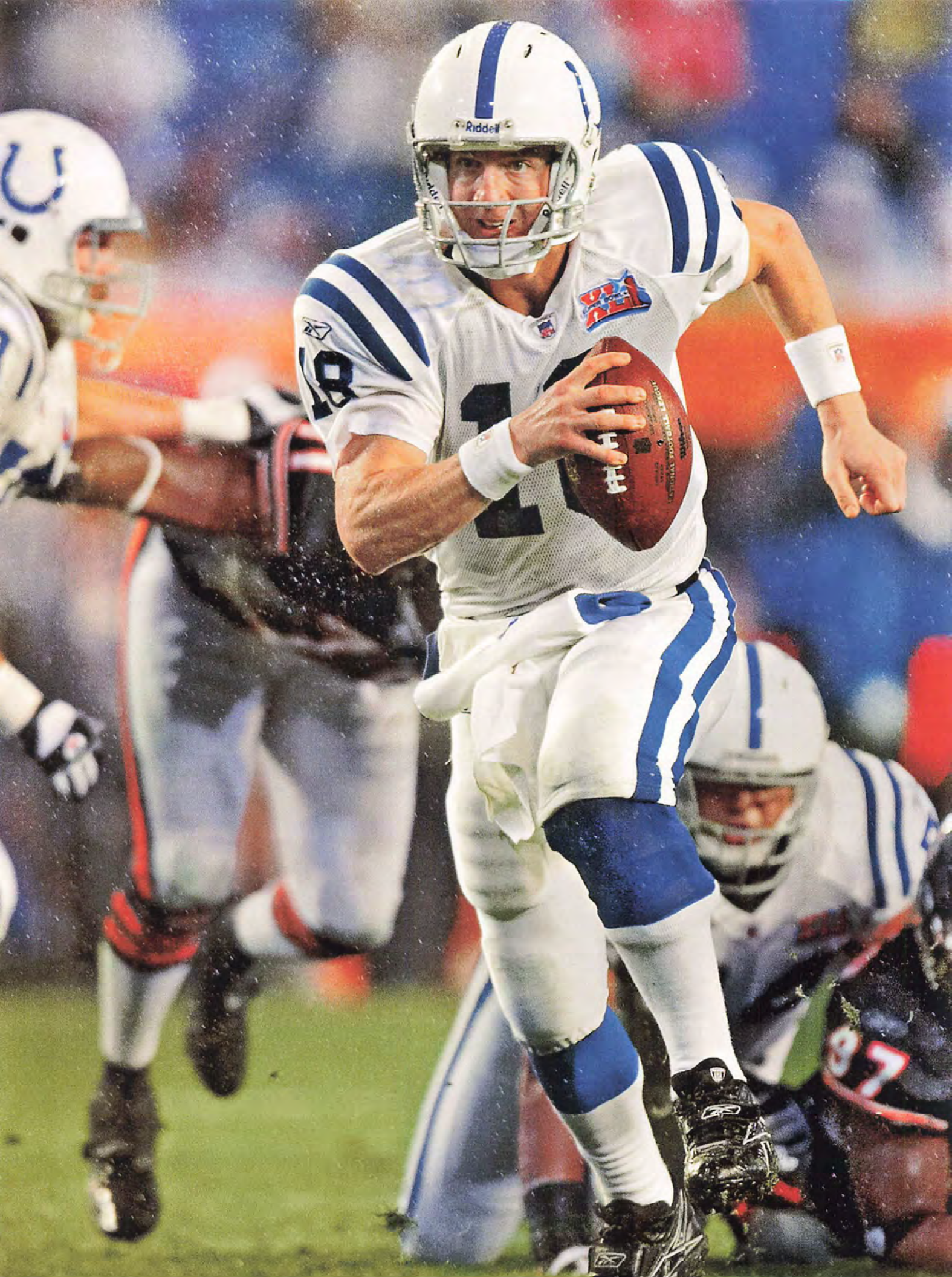
He has seen his middle kid play hundreds of games, all of them big in their own way—but the words of Big Chevy have never rung truer than they do right now.

his own number. He couldn't miss, and he knew it.

Manning treated the NFL's No. 1 pass defense like a scout team, throwing for 377 yards and tossing three TDs. The last one—in which he stuck the ball in running back Joseph Addai's gut, pulled it out and then fired it to tight end Dallas Clark on a post route 3½ minutes into the fourth quarter—even brought Manning's usually impassive little brother to his feet.

For the third time in four years a Manning is in the Super Bowl. Two years ago Eli won it for the Giants and Peyton was fist-pumping in a suite at University of Phoenix Stadium. Then he headed down to the locker room to deconstruct his brother's game-winning touchdown pass to Plaxico Burress. Now, Eli was the one in the locker room. Before Peyton could trade his towel for a suit, the two were reenacting a third-and-nine play in the fourth quarter, when Peyton pump-faked to receiver Pierre Garçon, let him break deep and found him for a 23-yard gain that set up the clinching field

□





From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
February 12, 2007

Acing The Test

By the 2006 season Manning had achieved just about everything in the NFL—except a Super Bowl win. That winter, after several emotionally draining years, his dedication finally paid off on football's biggest stage

→ **By Michael Silver**

Photographs by
Al Tielemans
For Sports Illustrated



I**N PURSUIT** of a victory that would recast his reputation, his heart racing with agitation, Peyton Manning called the boldest and most controversial audible of his career. Twelve days before he was to face the Bears in Super Bowl XLI, Manning stood up in a meeting room at the Colts' training facility and delivered an unpopular decree to his teammates, who had gathered to talk logistics before their weeklong trip to Miami Gardens. Team president Bill Polian, one of the NFL's most autocratic executives, had announced that there would be restrictions on visitors to the team's hotel in Fort Lauderdale but that players would be free to spend time with family members and other guests in the confines of their own rooms. Unnerved, Manning essentially threw out Polian's play for one more to his liking. "I don't think we should let anyone up in the rooms," Manning told the stunned group of players and coaches. "This is a business trip, and I don't want any distractions. I don't want any crying kids next to me while I'm trying to study."

That Manning would get his way was a foregone conclusion—Indianapolis has been Peyton's Place since his arrival as the No. 1 pick in the 1998 draft—but grumblings of dissent still filled the room. "We were heated," recalls veteran cornerback Nick Harper. "People were saying, 'We're grown-ass men. We've got wives and kids, and

LASER SHARP

Manning's maniacal focus—and ban on visitors in the team hotel to avoid "distractions"—annoyed some of his teammates, but no one could argue with his results.



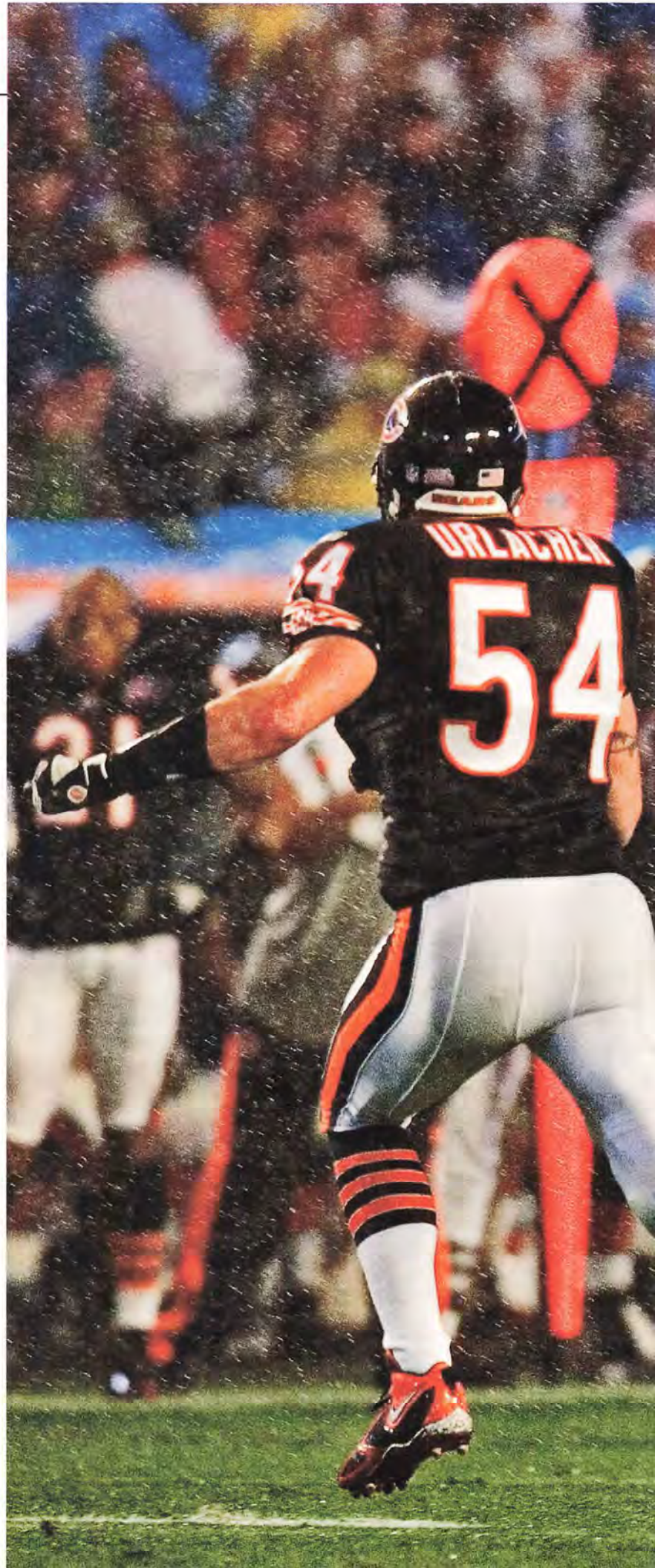
we'll make those decisions for ourselves.' But, you know, it turned out all right."

Hyperfocused to his heart's desire, Manning was at his Super Sunday best in leading the Colts to a 29-17 victory before 74,512 fans at Dolphin Stadium on Feb. 4. In earning MVP honors and shedding his can't-win-the-big-one tag—as did Indy coach Tony Dungy, who defeated his close friend and former assistant Lovie Smith in a matchup of the first two African-American head coaches in Super Bowl history—Manning overcame a sketchy start and seized control of a sloppy game in a driving rainstorm. Yet the seven-time All-Pro needed plenty of help to claim the Colts' first championship since their move to Indianapolis in 1984, and relying on his teammates to provide it was another sign of his maturation. A year after appearing to criticize his offensive linemen following a painful playoff defeat to the Steelers—"I'm trying to be a good teammate here," he said to reporters while discussing pass-protection problems—Manning now understands, as he said long after the game in a nearly empty locker room, "that everybody's got to do his part, and you have to trust them all to do that."

You might say that after years of racking up superlatives and statistics, Manning has found it takes 53 to tango—though that would evoke images of the embarrassing video from his performance in a New Orleans middle school play that surfaced after he referred to it in a media-day interview, and which cracked up his teammates as they watched it on ESPN during a meal at the team's hotel.

On Sunday night fans were dancing in the streets of Indy thanks to players such as rookie halfback Joseph Addai (143 rushing and receiving yards), his backup Dominic Rhodes (21 carries, 113 yards) and second-team cornerback Kelvin Hayden, whose 56-yard interception return for a touchdown with 11:59 remaining provided the game's final points. By then Manning had solved Chicago's formidable defense with a barrage of underneath passes and timely run calls, while Indy's far less heralded D had repelled quarterback Rex Grossman and limited the Bears to just a field goal after the 4:34 mark of the first quarter. "Everyone thinks this is about Peyton's legacy," Colts defensive end Dwight Freeney said afterward, "but listen—this is a 53-man team. Peyton doesn't do everything by himself, and at the end of the day defense wins championships. That still holds up."

When owner Jimmy Irsay—whose late father,





THROW AND TELL

The Colts got off to a rough start, allowing the first-ever score on the first play of a Super Bowl. But by halftime Manning had taken over, going 25 for 38, with 247 yards and one touchdown.

Bob, had abruptly uprooted the Colts and moved them from Baltimore—held up the Lombardi Trophy at game's end, it was a testament to the team's grit, perseverance and togetherness. "We're so tight-knit," Irsay said between celebratory hugs in the locker room. "Our bonds have been forged through some real-life tragedies, and those things make you stronger."

The suicide of Dungy's 18-year-old son, James, in December 2005 started the Colts on an emotional, character-testing journey. The shocking home playoff loss in January '06 to the eventual Super Bowl champion Steelers was followed by, among other events, the free-agent departure of All-Pro running back Edgerrin James, a popular veteran who signed with the Cardinals (and who sent Manning a text message wishing him luck before the Super Bowl); the death of Pro Bowl wideout Reggie Wayne's older brother, Rashad, in an automobile accident in September; and a late-season stretch (following a 9-0 start) in which Indy lost three of four games, including a 44-17 drubbing by the Jaguars in which the maligned run defense gave up an astounding 375 yards. Seeded third in the AFC after a 12-4 regular season, the Colts surprisingly shut down both the Chiefs and the Ravens on the ground. Manning then rallied Indy from a 21-3 deficit to pull out a dramatic 38-34 win over the Colts' longtime nemesis, New England, in the AFC championship game.

As the football world anticipated Manning's crowning achievement, the prickly passer refused to play along. While many of the Colts spent part of Super Bowl week enjoying the South Beach scene, Manning, after taking 20 players to dinner in Fort Lauderdale following the team's arrival on Jan. 29, was holed up at the Colts' hotel. "I'm having the best time of my life, honestly," Manning's wife, Ashley, said while socializing with family members at South Beach's swank Shore Club hotel. "But Peyton could care less about going out. He's doing it his way."

In an effort to replicate his routine in Indy, where he watches game film in his basement, Manning had the team provide a similar setup

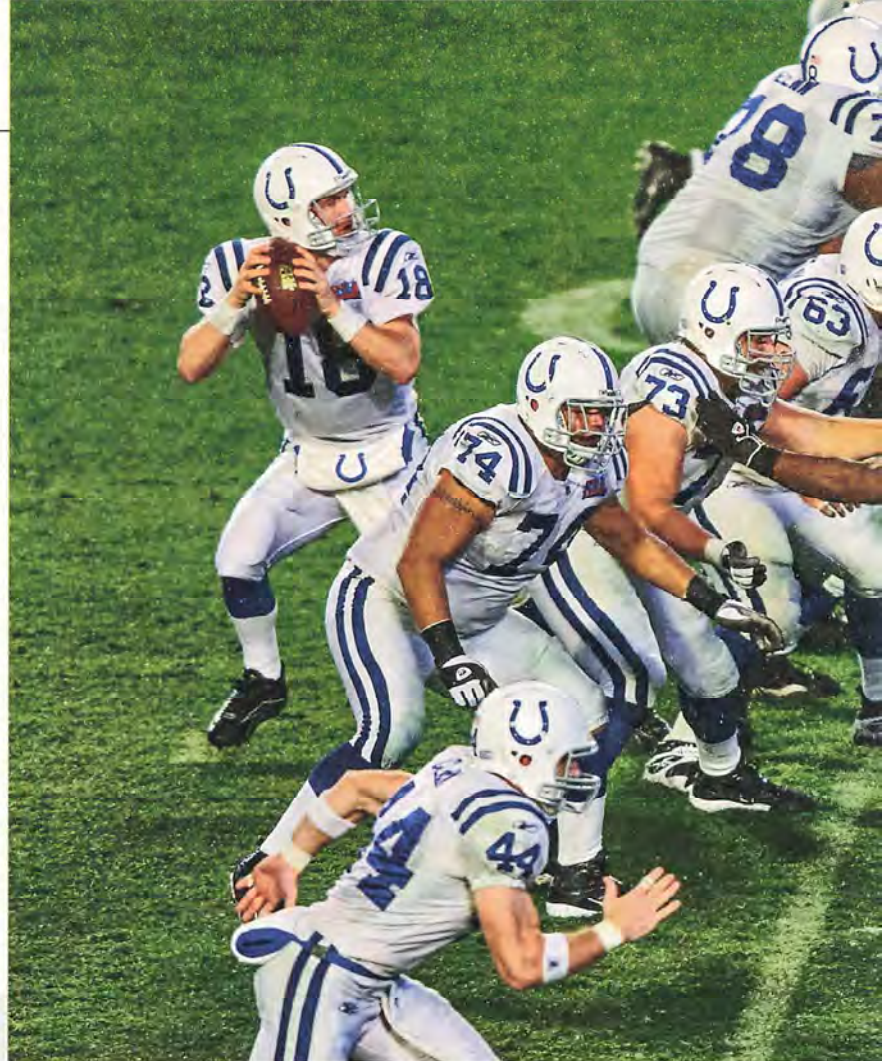


on the Marriott Harbor Beach resort's third floor. He even listened to the same music on bus rides to and from practice that he did during car trips throughout the playoffs: a mix CD given to him by Ashley for Christmas. But instead of copying tunes like Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days" to an iPod, Manning went retro. "Ashley bought me one of those Discman things for, like, eight bucks," he said. "Reggie Wayne and [linebacker] Cato June couldn't believe someone still made those anymore. They were taking pictures of it because they thought it was so funny. But hey, I kept to the routine."

NOT EVERY Colts player found humor in Manning's intensity. The no-visitors policy had some teammates complaining about the franchise's "Peyton Rules." And after Dungy and offensive coordinator Tom Moore asked for Manning's input in planning the Wednesday practice session, one player grouched that the team should be renamed the Indianapolis Peytons.

The Peytons were a tad tight heading into their meeting with the Bears, and the start of the game did nothing to alleviate the stress. Chicago rookie Devin Hester, the University of Miami star who had scored six special teams touchdowns during the regular season, took the opening kickoff, danced up the middle, burst to his right and struck like a Hurricane. His 92-yard dash was the first-ever score on the opening play of a Super Bowl, and it put the Colts in an immediate 7-0 hole. Dungy, who in a speech to his players the previous night had warned that they'd have to overcome "a storm" at some point during the game, shook his head and thought, I wish I weren't that prophetic.

Indy's first play from scrimmage called for tight end Dallas Clark to run a seam route underneath the safeties, but he broke it inside instead. "We only had that first play picked out for about two weeks," said Manning, "and he ran the wrong route." Manning's throw was deflected by Brian Urlacher, the Bears' All-Pro middle linebacker, whose typically impressive effort would include 10 tackles. Later in the drive the jumpy Colts were called for a pair of false-start penalties, the second of which set up third-and-13 from the Indy 41. Hoping to hit his favorite target, Pro Bowl wideout Marvin Harrison, Manning made his lone mistake of the day, hanging a deep ball that strong safety Chris Harris picked off. Gulp. Said

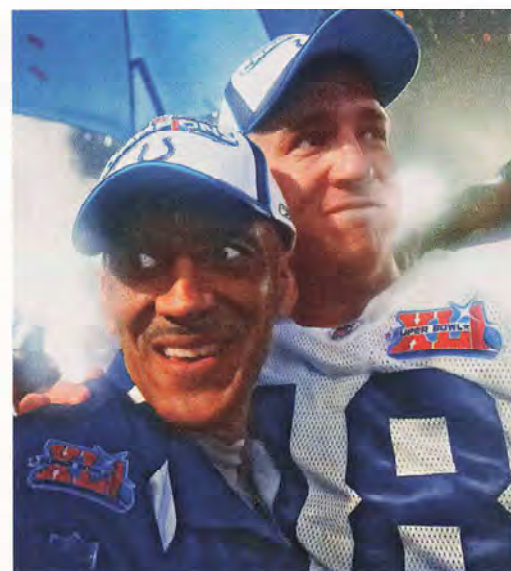


Manning now understands, as he said after the game, "that everybody's got to do his part, and you have to trust them all to do that."

Manning, "We looked like a team that had never played in the Super Bowl."

Manning settled the Colts' nerves with 6:58 left in the first quarter. On third-and-10 from the Indy 47 he called 66 D X-Pump, a play Moore installed for the Super Bowl that called for Wayne, lined up to the left side, to run an in-and-go route designed to exploit Chicago's base Cover 2 zone scheme. The hope was that free safety Danieal Manning (no relation) would bite on the pump-fake. What Peyton got was even more ideal—Chicago's Manning, who seemed mistakenly to be playing man coverage while the rest of his teammates followed their zone assignments, jumped tight end Ben Utecht's inside route, leaving Wayne alone in the middle of the field. Facing pressure from defensive tackle Tank Johnson, Manning held his ground long enough to let Wayne break free, then delivered a rainbow that, from the receiver's perspective, "seemed like it hung in the air forever." Wayne spun around to catch the ball inside the 20 and cruised into the end zone to complete the 53-yard touchdown; Indy trailed 7-6 after punter Hunter Smith botched the hold on the extra point.

Kicking short to avoid another runback by Hester (a practice Indy followed several more times later in the game), the Colts got the ball when Robert Mathis forced a Gabe Reid fumble and Tyjuan Hagler recovered. But on the next play Manning and Addai failed to connect on a handoff,



TOP OF THE WORLD

Manning and Dungy (above) had been through a lot together by the time they took on the Bears in South Florida and emerged—after a bruising, messy, fumble-filled game—as champions.

and Mark Anderson, the Bears' rookie defensive end, pounced on the ball. Remarkably, it was the first of two back-to-back fumble sequences in the first half. (The Bloopers Bowl would include eight turnovers, five by Chicago.) During the play Manning banged his already sprained thumb on his passing hand that had required a pregame painkilling injection, but the football gods were taking care of him. "With a wet ball," he explained later, "you've got to hold it light to make it go where you want. So the bad thumb kind of helped me because I couldn't grip it real hard."

Before Manning (25 of 38, 247 yards, one touchdown) took hold of the game, the Bears managed one show of offensive force. A 52-yard run by halfback Thomas Jones set up Grossman's four-yard touchdown pass to wideout Muhsin Muhammad, giving Chicago a 14-6 lead with 4:34 left in the first quarter. At that point, to paraphrase halftime performer Prince, many in the decidedly pro-Bears crowd were ready to party like it was 1985. But Indy pulled ahead before halftime on the first of three Adam Vinatieri field goals and Rhodes's one-yard scoring run. With a 16-14 lead, the Colts' increasingly energized defenders were confident the game was theirs.

"We knew," said Harper, who reaggravated a left high-ankle sprain late in the second quarter and did not return. "We wanted to put the ball in Grossman's hands. Now I can say what I'd really felt all week: We'd seen the film, and we knew there was no way in hell they were going to beat us in the passing game."

When Grossman got the ball at his own 20, with the Bears trailing 22-17 and 13:38 remaining in the game, he had a chance to prove Harper wrong and answer all the critics who'd dogged him for much of his first full season as a starter. Instead, he underthrew the sideline pass to Muhammad that Hayden caught and returned to break the game open. Less than two minutes after that mistake, Grossman lobbed a deep ball for wideout Bernard

Berrian that was intercepted by free safety Bob Sanders, and the only remaining suspense was whether Dungy, who'd never gotten a championship dousing, would receive a Gatorade bath. (He did, though in the steady rain it's a wonder the unflappable coach even noticed.)

The game had been over for an hour and a half before Manning finally showered. He didn't leave the locker room until a few minutes after midnight; the rest of his teammates had already boarded buses that would take them to the victory party at their hotel. At 30, after so many years spent in the spotlight, he'd finally earned the bling that would validate his status as one of football's enduring elite, and he wanted to get the party started. *Glory days, they'll pass you by...*

The rain drenched Manning's dark suit as he left the stadium and walked briskly ahead of his older brother, Cooper, and their father, Archie, toward the last of the buses. Cooper looked back and, worried that Archie might be left behind, yelled, "Dad! Come on! We've got to go!"

Archie picked up the pace, but it proved unnecessary. There, waiting at the bus's front door, was Peyton, smiling like a newly crowned champion. As his teammates could have attested, there was no way in hell that bus was leaving until the quarterback was good and ready. □

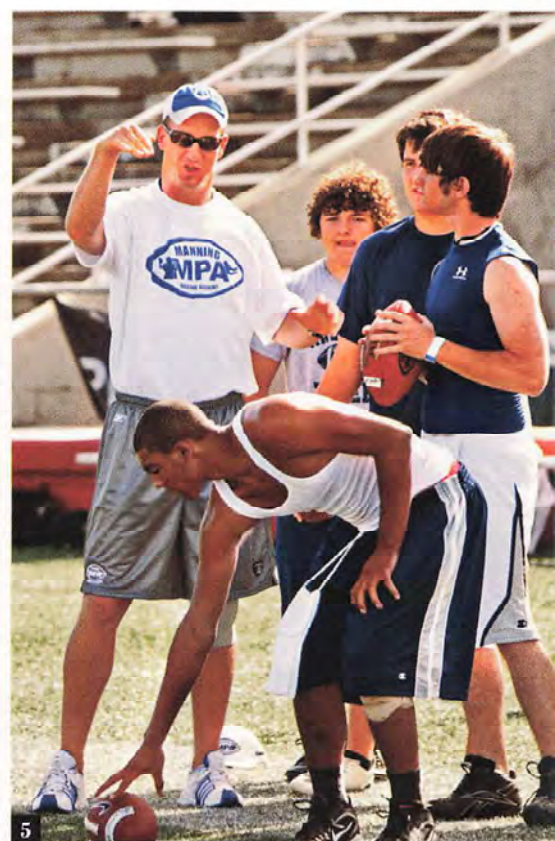
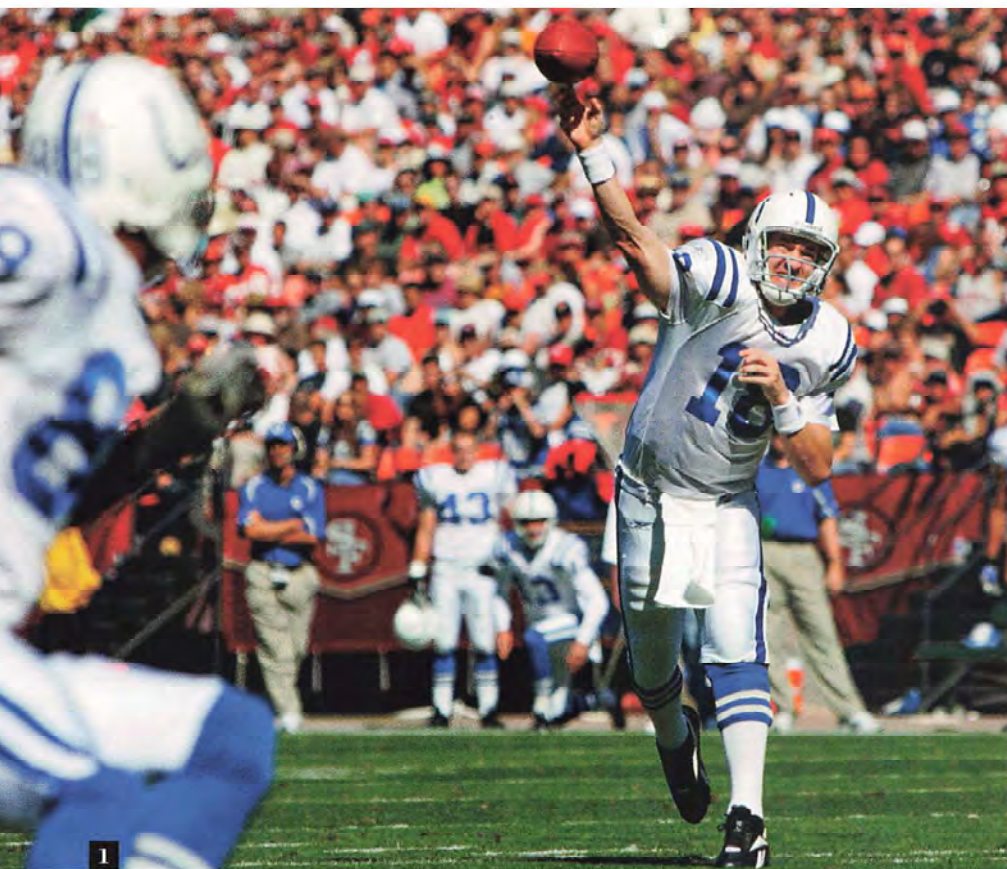




THE COLTS YEARS

1. Soaking it up after winning Super Bowl XLI over the Bears.
2. Five Colts players were all smiles before the 2007 Pro Bowl.
3. Celebrating the Super Bowl win at the White House.
4. Receiving the '05 Walter Payton Man of the Year award with Payton's widow, Connie.
5. Peyton and Eli loaded supplies before heading to New Orleans to help Hurricane Katrina victims in '05.

DONALD MIRALLE/GETTY IMAGES (1);
KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS (2);
MARK WILSON/GETTY IMAGES (3);
JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES (4);
ROBERT SCHEER (5)



THE COLTS YEARS

1. Connecting with Marvin Harrison against the 49ers on Oct. 9, 2005.

2. Posing with NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue on draft day, April 18, 1998.

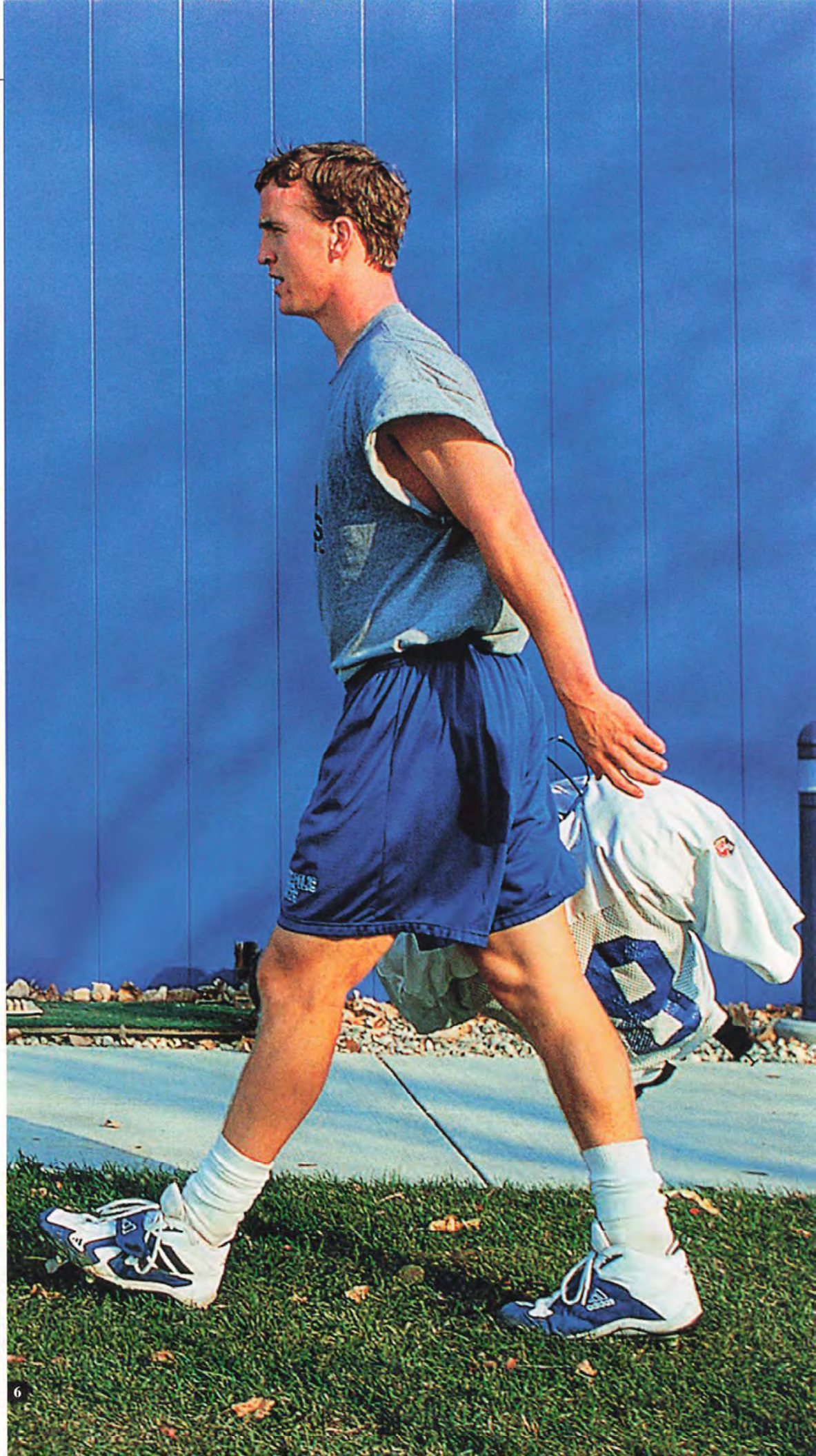
3. Clowning with Muhammad Ali in 2005.

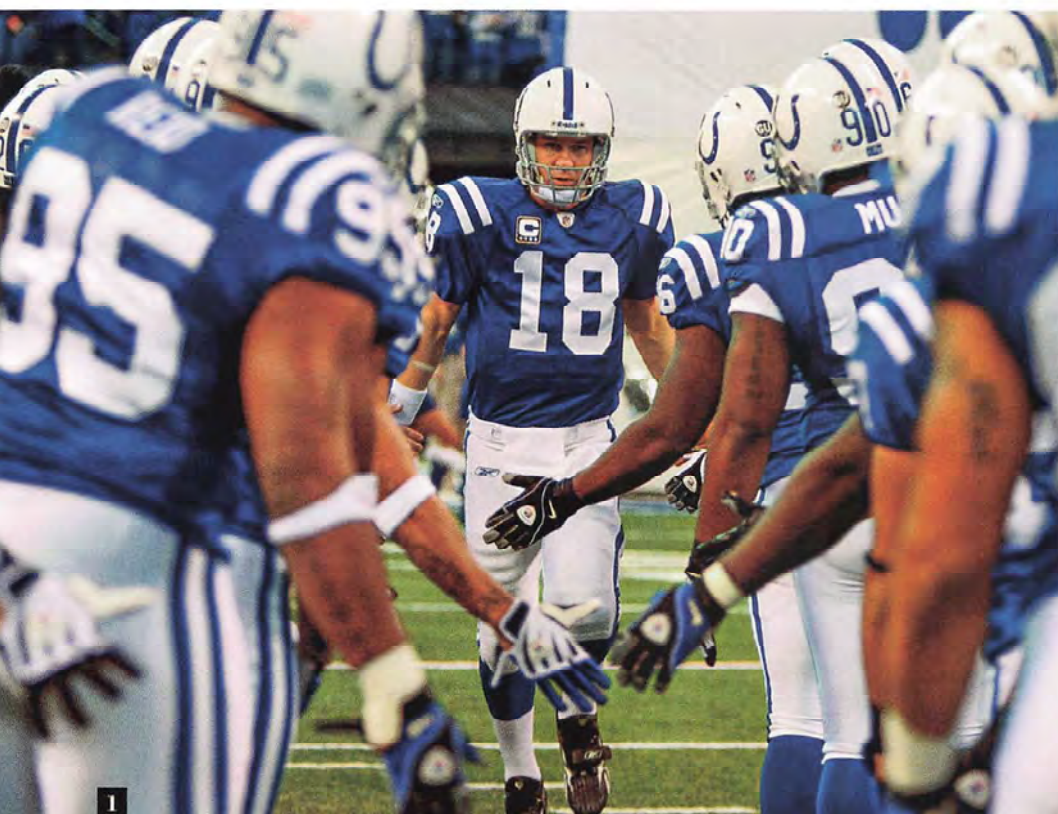
4. Floating along after the Super Bowl XLI win.

5. Giving pointers at the Manning Passing Academy camp in '08.

6. At practice midway through the 1999 season.

ROBERT B. STANTON/NFL PHOTO LIBRARY/
GETTY IMAGES (1); JOHN IACONO FOR
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (2); SHAWN EHLERS/
NFL/GETTY IMAGES (3); BRIAN SPURLOCK/
USA TODAY SPORTS (4);
BARRY LAWRENCE (5); AL TIELEMANS FOR
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (6)

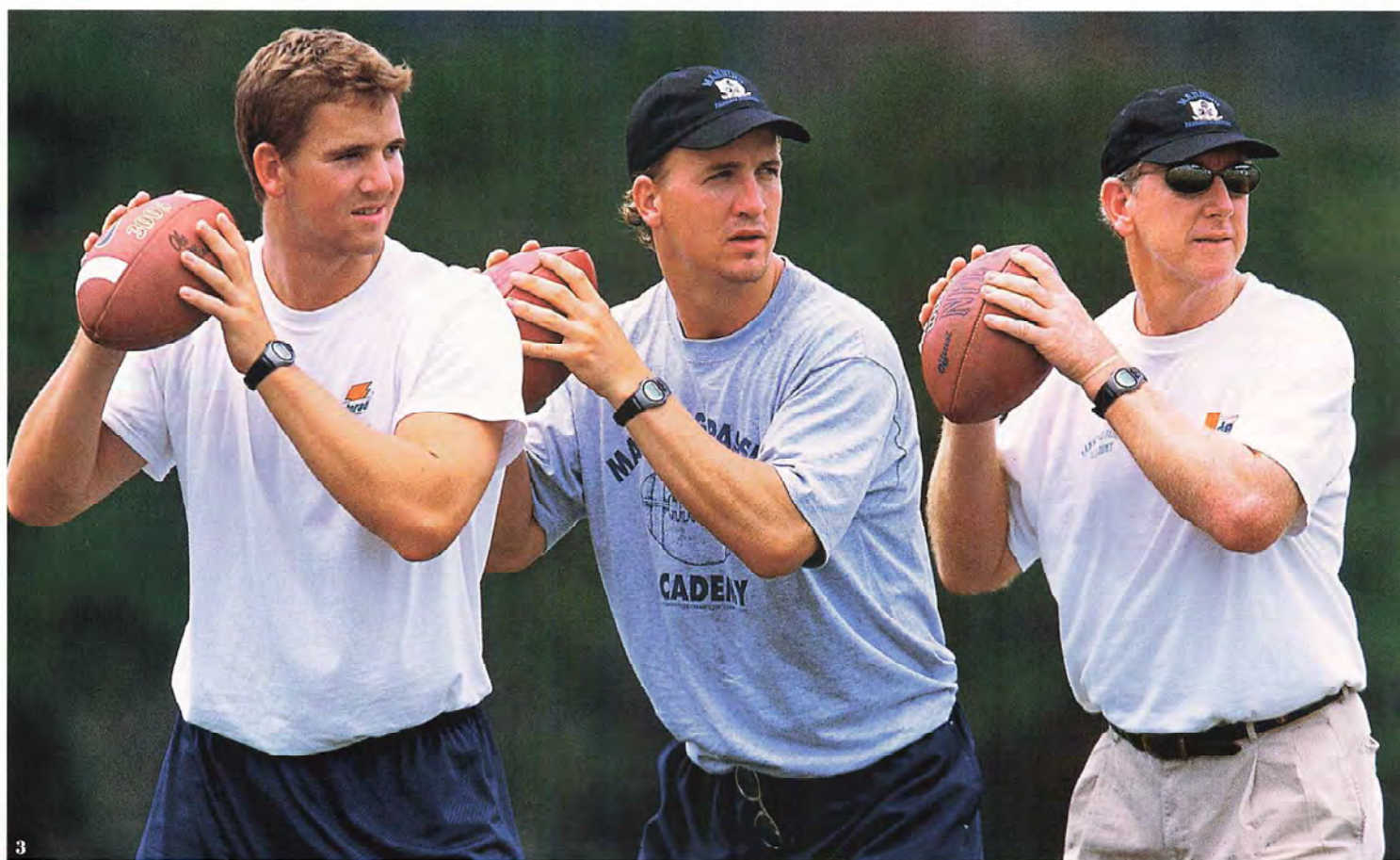




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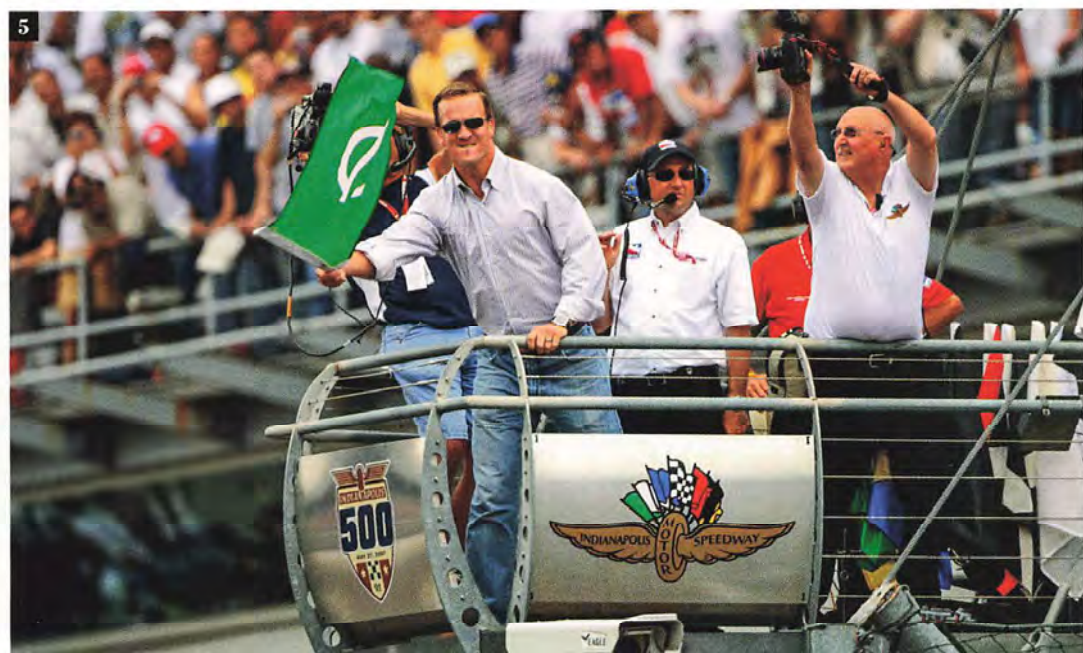


3

THE COLTS YEARS

1. Taking the field for a game against the Titans in 2008.
2. Arriving with wife Ashley for a White House state dinner in '07.
3. Eli, Peyton and Archie at the Manning Passing Academy in '02.
4. Teaming with Tiger Woods at the Bay Hill Pro-Am in '05.
5. And they're off! Waving the green flag to start the Indy 500 in '07.

JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES (1); HARAZ N. GHANBARI/AP (2); BILL FRANKS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (3); GARY W. GREEN/ORLANDO SENTINEL/KRT/ABACA (4); JOE ROBBINS/USA TODAY SPORTS (5)





From SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
January 26, 2009

'Take My Quarterback, Please

Deconstructing the comedic stylings of a born football icon who made himself a master—and damn funny—pitchman

✦ **By Bill Scheft**

Illustration by
Fred Harper

L

LAST WEEK NBC announced that there were still seven or eight commercial spots available for Super Bowl XLIII. I'm sure I wasn't the only one thinking, Just give them to Peyton Manning. At least they'll be funny.

Look, I know he's in every other ad during football season, but he is not overexposed nearly enough. For anyone who ever stumbled across the 40,000th cable airing of *The Godfather*, promised themselves they'd watch two minutes and stayed till half past Luca Brasi, it's the same thing, minus the piano wire. You know the scene, you're mouthing the line, you know the payoff. But it is always satisfying. And you'll stop to look the next time too.

We stop and shush the room for a Peyton Manning commercial. Then the game returns, and we go back to hoping he gets sacked. Such is the power of comedy. Manning can win over his loudest haters with 30 seconds of bemused idiot-box philosophy. It's just another Manning checkoff: Everything changes at the line. And the line is usually something like, "Scoot over, will you? Anybody got any chips?"

"He transforms himself so easily and readily from quarterback





superstar to likable, condescending TV stooge,” says my boss, Dave Letterman, before repeating one of Manning’s MasterCard Priceless Pep Talk codas: “If I were you, I’d just buy some bigger shirts.”

To call someone a “TV stooge” is the ultimate accolade from Dave. To be a stooge is to willingly participate with no ego, no concern for how it all looks.

Manning is not the first athlete to deliver a laugh on cue on behalf of a brand. But why is his comic technique galaxies ahead of other jock pitchmen?

“He’s a great communicator,” says Rick Clancy, senior VP of corporate communications at Sony. “Been working with us for a few years now. He was a communications and business major in college. Perhaps he has some ambition later in life.”

If you punch in “Peyton Manning + commercials” on YouTube, you get 207 results. Sure, many of them are efforts with titles like “Pricelass Peep Traks with Clayton Fanning,” but that’s not why you’re here. So, why does it work? Why is he funny? Why do we like him and why is the template so refillable? Let’s look at some film and break down the tendencies.

He’s the antishill He fronts more sponsors than the hood of a NASCAR ride, but for the life of me, most times I cannot remember who Manning is doing the commercials for. Contrast that with Charles Barkley, who I know did spots for T-Mobile, just as I know he should have asked Dwyane Wade or someone else in his Fave 5 to drive him home earlier this month.

How can Manning’s advice on dealing with a bad haircut (“Clean part, high and tight, no sideburns, no mistakes. . .”) even subliminally scream Get MasterCard? And who can even get a MasterCard now? Great comedy is misdirection. Sometimes it appears as if Manning has wandered through the wrong door and wound up on set. He is a singular marketing tool who never seems to be hawking a product. He does not want to be the face of the brand, just the face of the bit.

He takes it seriously that he’s playing a character who takes himself seriously Manning favors the confident clueless guy, a staple of the stooge, which is appealing and disarming. But there is subtle versatility to even that thumbnail. Alan Zweibel, an Emmy Award-winning comedy writer, gets closer. “Peyton Manning makes me laugh,” Zweibel explains, “because he’s just as good at playing someone who doesn’t get it when people are being nasty



HE'S GOT GAME

Manning's comedy skills weren't on display only in commercials; his 2007 appearance as the SNL host went down as perhaps the best performance by an athlete on the show.

toward him as he is playing someone who doesn't care when people are being nasty toward him.” There is an uncompromising earnestness, forever propped up by questionable logic. I don’t want to rewrite anybody’s script, but Manning could have easily tagged a line like “So if sports are shot with a Sony,

shouldn’t you watch them on one?” with “I’m just saying . . .” instead of the surreal “Chicken, no!”

He distances himself from himself It starts with the outfit, usually blue shorts and a gray T-shirt. It continues with the pursed-lip pauses. It ends with the snatches of wry candor. (“You know what? I’m bummed too.” “Yeah, you’re feeling me.” “Weather here’s sweet!” “Pffft, soccer. . .”) Each performance is relentlessly minimal, which wouldn’t mean much until you contrast it with the other Peyton Manning we see on TV: the flapping, screeching, spinning, nodding, gesticulating, yammering presnap-count lunatic, \$99.2 million-armed genius. It doesn’t add up.

So, bring on Peyton. God knows, he’s got the time right now. Scratch the kicking Clydesdales and blot out the talking stains and keep him coming. Manning will be the first to know when the joke’s over. When it’s not happening anymore. When it’s time to buy some bigger shirts.

Bill Scheft was a longtime writer for The Late Show with David Letterman.

The Late Greats

A year before the quarterback said goodbye, he helped another Indiana hero hang up his mic

✦ **By Peyton Manning**

From *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*
June 1, 2015

I'VE BEEN a part of some great moments, but standing in the Ed Sullivan Theater and being part of the 6,028th and final *Late Show with David Letterman* was one of the greatest in my life.

I love David Letterman. I've never done any other late-night show. When I watch him, I feel he hits the right note—every time. So to be asked to be a part of the final Top 10 List, along with Alec Baldwin, Barbara Walters, Steve Martin, Jerry Seinfeld, Jim Carrey, Chris Rock, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Tina Fey and Bill Murray, was an incredible honor. I looked around and thought, Am I just a stand-in for someone who couldn't make it? Did they need a tall guy to even out the height difference with the other guests?

The Top 10 List was, "Things I've always wanted to say to Dave." I was No. 3, and the writers gave me a good line. I said, "Dave, you are to comedy what I am ... to comedy."

After that I slipped into the back of the theater to watch the rest of the show. Having been a high school and college player for eight years, then an NFL player for 18, I really appreciated Dave's taking the time to thank all the people who worked on the show behind the scenes: the writers, the makeup people, everybody. It's just like in the NFL, where the equipment guys and the trainers and so many other people are crucial to your success.

My favorite memory of Dave isn't from any of my five appearances on the show. It's from the day before the 2012 NFL draft, when the Colts had the first pick. I had just signed with the Broncos, and I was working out at their facility. I got word that Dave was trying to reach me. He explained that he was going to have Andrew Luck on the show and present him with his new Colts jersey. Dave said, "I don't want to do it if it makes you uncomfortable at all."

I said, "Dave, it doesn't matter what I think. You do what you feel is best for the show." Really, I didn't care. But he said, "That's it! We're not doing it. Forget it."

That meant so much to me. I can tell you this: No other host would have called to ask what I thought.

Being on *Letterman*, you always wanted to bring something to the table. My first time was two days before the 1997 Heisman Trophy presentation, my senior year. I was on with Courteney Cox and Shania Twain. My older



STUPID PEYTON TRICKS

Manning threw passes with Dave in '05 and was part of a starry final Top 10.



brother, Cooper, who is one of the funniest people I know, helped me prepare. The staff does these prep interviews, going over stuff you could talk about. They were curious about my decision to stay for my final college season. So I talked to Cooper, and he came up with a good line. When Dave asked me about it, I said, "Dave, it's just like when you stayed for your senior year at Ball State."

After I cracked another joke, Dave said, "The kid's got writers!"

I got asked to do the show again in 2005, and we threw footballs into moving cabs outside the Ed Sullivan Theater. And I got asked again in '07, after Indianapolis won the Super Bowl. Then, in 2014, I went to New York to see Derek Jeter play one last time, and I went on with Dave once more. I wrote him a letter saying how much he had entertained my family and me over the years. He wrote back and signed it, "Your friend, Dave." That'll be a lifetime keepsake.

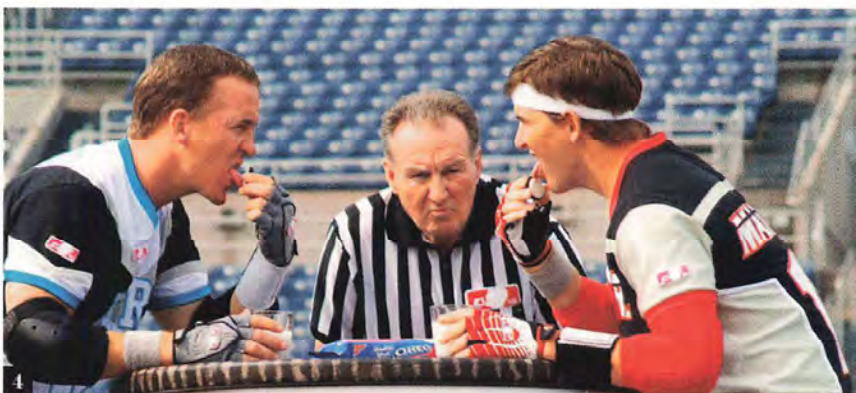
I think one reason I was asked to be on the finale was our Indianapolis connection. Dave is grateful to anyone who has helped his hometown. He said he appreciated things I had done as a Hoosier, on and off the field.

When we finished the Top 10 List, Dave thanked the 10 of us. I thought, I should be saying that to him, for all the years of great TV and great comedy. I'm really going to miss him—and the show. I'll always be a Letterman guy. □



Commercial Appeal

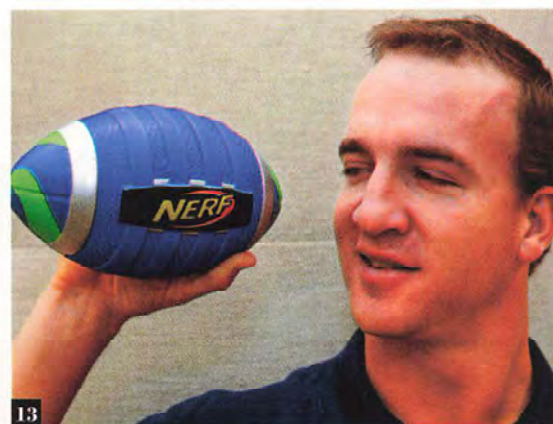
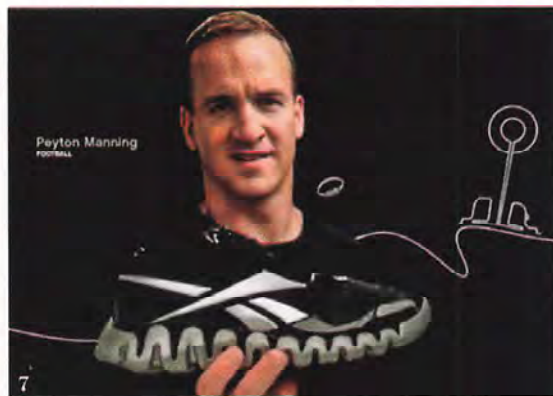
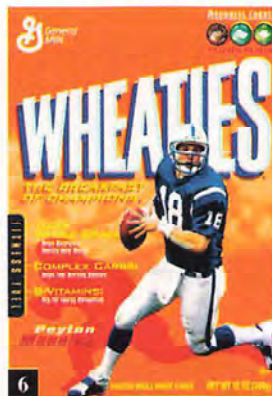
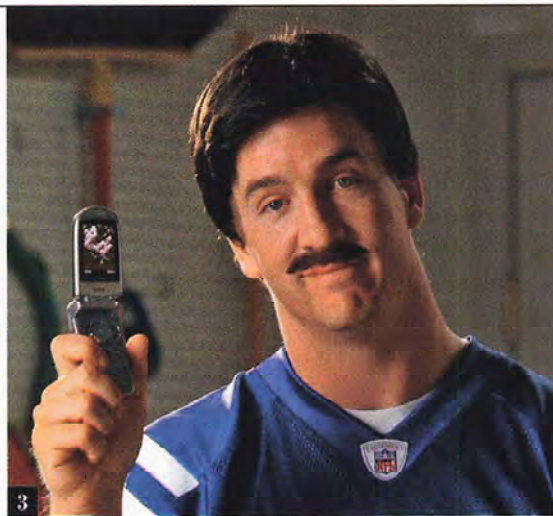
Peyton Manning was always all business on the field. Off it, not so much: His escapades as a TV pitchman are as memorable—and as endearing—as anything he did in uniform



PITCH PERFECT

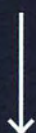
1. Rapping with Eli for DirecTV, 2013
 2. Shooting a DirecTV spot with Eli, 2007 3. Sprint commercial, 2006 4. Taking the Oreo challenge against Eli, 2008 5. MasterCard commercial, 2009 6. Wheaties box, 2004 7. Reebok commercial, 2010 8. Shooting with Papa John's founder John Schnatter, 2012 9. Singing an ode to chicken parm for Nationwide, 2014 10. Gatorade commercial, 2005 11. Playing ping-pong against Justin Timberlake for Sony, 2009 12. Buick commercial, 2012 13. An appearance at Hasbro headquarters to promote Nerf, 2007

DIRECTV: (1) BILL FRANKS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED; (2) SPRINT/AP; (3) KRAFT/AP; (4) MASTERCARD/AP; (5) GENERAL MILLS/UP; (6) YOUTUBE.COM; (7, 8, 10, 11, 12) JACK TEMPSEY/INVISION/AP; (8) RAY STUBBLEBINE/HASBRO/AP; (13)



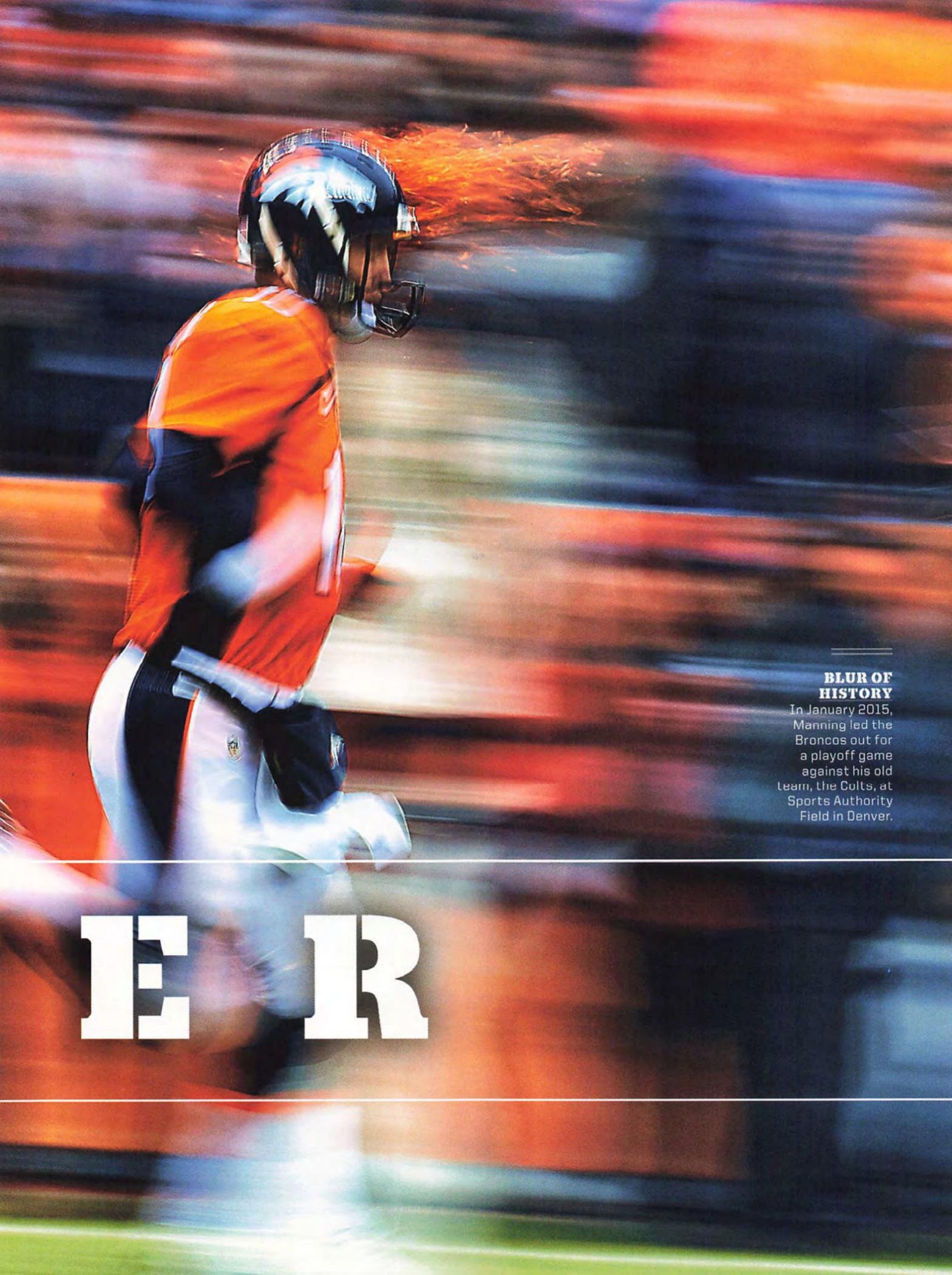
Mile High and Mighty

After multiple neck surgeries, Peyton Manning wasn't sure he'd play again. But after leaving his comfort zone in Indy to create a new one in Denver, the Sheriff did more than extend his historic career—he elevated it to new heights



D E N V

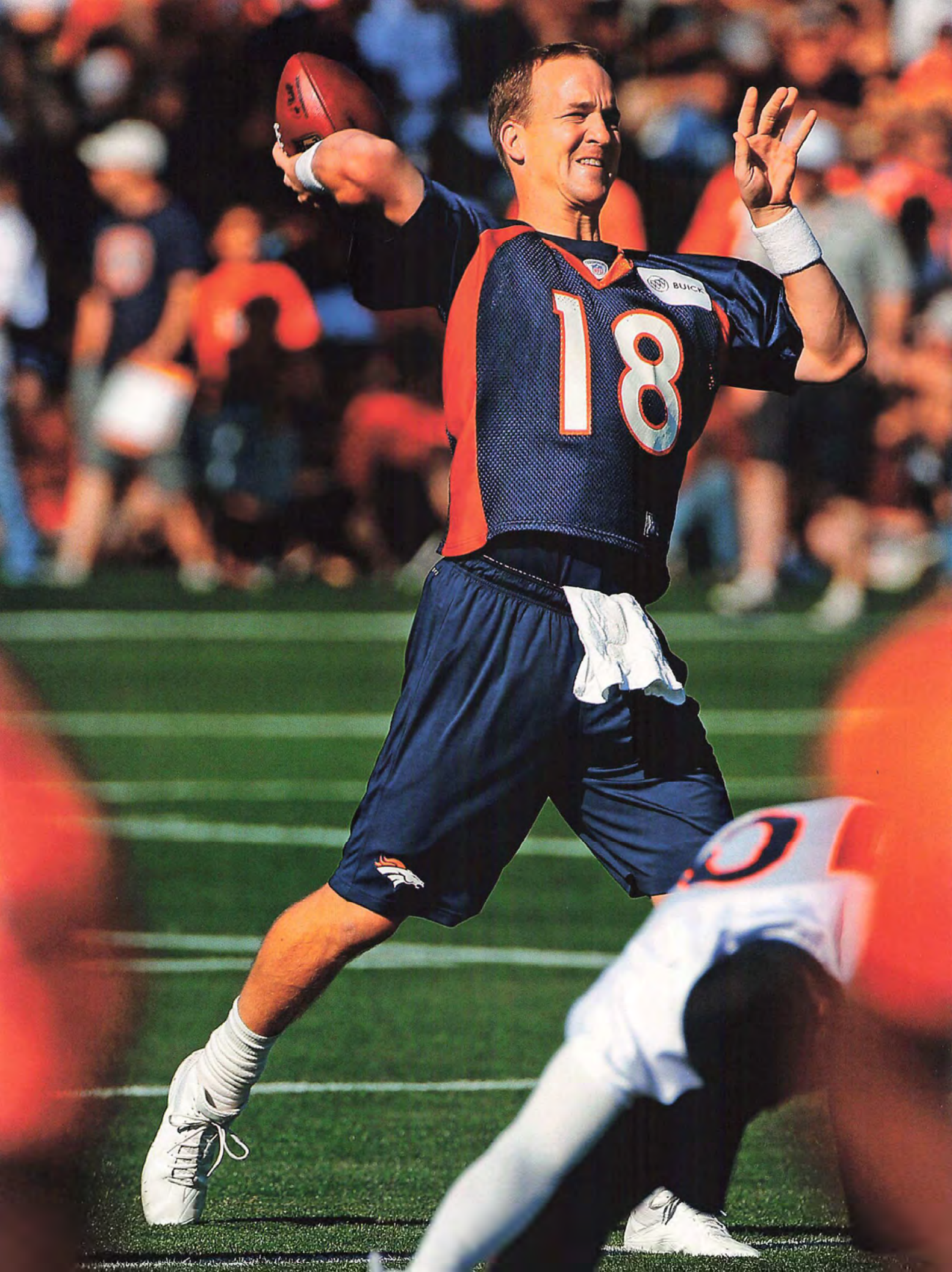
Photograph by
Simon Bruty
For Sports Illustrated



**BLUR OF
HISTORY**

In January 2015, Manning led the Broncos out for a playoff game against his old team, the Colts, at Sports Authority Field in Denver.

ER



Playing the Long Game

Cut by Indianapolis, where he had played his entire 14-year NFL career, Manning became the most-prized free agent in league history in 2012. The behind-the-scenes story of how he hit the recruiting trail and ended up in Denver

→ **By Peter King**

Photograph by
Doug Pensinger
Getty Images



DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP

RELATABLE YOU

Elway (right), who played his entire career with Denver, said he courted the free agent Manning by treating the fellow Super Bowl-winning quarterback as he would have wanted to be treated in the same situation.

I don't know what to do. What does a free agent do?

—PEYTON MANNING, March 7, to his quarterback mentor and friend, David Cutcliffe

T

HIS DOESN'T happen to legends with time left on the clock. Legends who can play—and Peyton Manning can still play, if his neck holds up—don't jet across the country from one city to the next in a two-week span to showcase themselves. And let teams showcase themselves to him. Manning, the highest-profile free agent in NFL history, interviewed the teams that wanted him as much as they questioned him.

In a meeting with the Broncos on March 9, the four-time league MVP turned to coach John Fox's two chief aides, offensive coordinator Mike McCoy and defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, and inquired, "What about you guys? You one and done?" Meaning: Will you take the first head coaching offer you get if we have success here in 2012?

The question surprised both men. Del Rio, fired as the Jaguars' coach three months earlier, said all he wanted to do was get back to hands-on coaching and away from the politics of the top job. McCoy said he turned down one head coaching interview last year because it didn't feel right; he said he'd leave only for the right job.

On March 20, Manning was formally introduced as the Broncos' quarterback. There's been much speculation as to why he chose Denver over a team with a regional, nostalgic edge (Tennessee, where he'd gone to college) or a clearly better roster (San Francisco, which came within a game of the Super Bowl last season). The reason can be summed up in a word: familiarity. Familiarity with Broncos executive vice president of football operations John Elway, a Hall of Fame quarterback who won two Super Bowls in his late 30s and with whom Manning shared a clear mutual respect. Familiarity, too, with Fox, a former college recruiter who put his skills of persuasion to good use; and with Del Rio, against whom Manning competed for years when Del Rio was coaching Jacksonville in the AFC South. Familiarity with good friend and Denver resident Brandon Stokley, the former Colts receiver, who hosted Manning on his two trips to Colorado during the process. Familiarity with the teams on Denver's schedule in 2012, franchises Manning has faced a total of 93 times. "From talking with Peyton during the process," said Tony Dungy, his former coach with the Colts, "I sensed Denver was the closest thing he could find to what he had in Indianapolis."

And this: Manning likes to be in control. Of everything. In this process, he was. Elway played the game perfectly by doing precisely what Manning wanted him to do—make your case, then stay out of the way while I make my call.

The story of Manning's stressful fortnight of freedom includes misdirection car rides, secret meetings and workouts, and words of wisdom from trusted confidants. Here's how it went down.

CUT DAY AND AFTER MARCH 7-8

After an emotional farewell news conference in Indianapolis on March 7, Manning spent an hour with 30 longtime Colts employees. "Maintenance, secretaries, equipment guys, everybody who'd been there a long time," he said. "Some guys leave a place after a long time, and they're bitter. Not me. But it was important for me to get closure."

He then flew to Miami, where he and his wife, Ashley, have a vacation home, and was annoyed to be chased by local news crews and a helicopter as if he were O.J. riding up the 405. One of his first phone calls that night was from Fox, who told Manning that the Broncos would love to have him visit when he was ready. From his 10 years working the phones and living rooms of recruits for eight college



"Some guys leave a place after a long time, and they're bitter. Not me," Manning said. "But it was important for me to get closure."

programs, Fox knows one of the keys is to get in on the ground floor.

Manning was uncertain what he would do—even the day before he was released he had thought that he and the Colts might work things out—but his decision wasn't going to be about money. It was going to be about picking a place where he'd feel comfortable early on because of how quickly he'd have to mesh with a new team.

"He sounded bothered that night," Fox said. "Wasn't in his comfort zone."

THE FIRST WEEKEND MARCH 9-11

There's a nifty website, flightaware.com, that allows users to enter the tail number of a private plane and follow its movements around the country. Thus it was discovered that the Cessna Citation X twin-engine jet belonging to Broncos owner Pat Bowlen had flown to Miami early on March 9, collected Manning, then stopped in Stillwater, Okla.—where a Broncos delegation that included Elway, Fox and McCoy was watching Oklahoma State's pro day—and landed at an airport in suburban Englewood, Colo. After disembarking from the plane, the party traveled to the team facility two miles away, pursued by a media armada.

From the start it was apparent that Elway would be the Broncos' greatest asset. He had won back-to-back Super Bowls with Denver at ages 37 and 38, after many thought he was finished. "How many people in the world



NEW BEGINNINGS

After 14 years in Indianapolis and two weeks in free-agent limbo, Manning eventually settled on Denver, making his Mile High debut in a 31-19 victory over the Steelers, the first of 13 wins in his initial season as a Bronco.

can identify with what Peyton's going through right now?" said former NFL safety John Lynch, a friend of both men. "A very small handful. John's one of them. I saw it in their conversations. They really connected."

Fox had Broncos p.r. man Patrick Smyth address two elements he thought would be used against Denver in the bidding—that its defense would hurt Manning's chances of winning big and that Manning, who'd played his home games indoors since entering the league in 1998, would suffer outdoors in Denver. Smyth came up with two tidbits for Fox to use on Manning.

"Do you realize," Fox asked the QB, "that the Broncos have played 519 home games, and the average temperature at kickoff has been 60.1°?"

That was Manning's kind of stat. As was the next. "In your 14 years in Indianapolis," Fox said, "the Colts averaged 26 points per game. In my 10 years as a head coach [with the Panthers and the Broncos], when our teams scored 26 points or more, our record is 39-3."

The Broncos had planned to host a dinner for Manning that Friday night, but how to do it quietly? To dodge the media, staffers prepared seven vehicles to leave the complex at the same time. A news crew from Fox affiliate KDVR-TV followed the van that had transported Manning from the airport. When it reached a seafood place, the crew went in and asked a Broncos employee, "Where's Manning?" Not here. He'd slipped into a black SUV with tinted windows, which had taken him to Cherry Hills Country Club. There he was ready to hear Elway's sales pitch.

Except Elway wasn't selling. When the Hall of Fame quarterback sat with Manning alone at the club, Elway saw a person "in shock" over being cut and imagined what it would have been like if the Broncos, for whom he played his entire career, had released him after 13 or 14 seasons. "There's got to be a dagger in your gut right now," Elway told Manning. "Take your time. Be thorough. Make the right decision, whether it's us or someone else."

"I put myself in Peyton's shoes," Elway told SI. "No pressure. Don't give the hard sell. Let the organization speak for itself. I told him that as much as I wanted him to play for the Broncos, I knew it would be stupid if we forced him and it wasn't a good fit. That's how I'd feel."

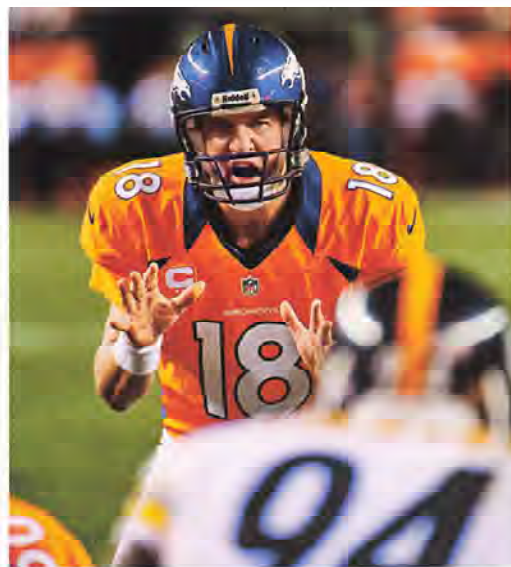
Midway through the evening Elway received a text telling him the Redskins had just pulled off a huge trade with St. Louis for the second pick in the draft, presumably to take prized Baylor quarterback Robert Griffin III. Elway told Manning, "Whoa—Washington just traded for the second pick. Looks like they'll get RG3."

"What!?" Manning said, stunned.

From that reaction, Elway knew that the Redskins had been on Manning's list.

Manning slept at Stokley's house in suburban Castle Rock that night, and the next morning, wanting to get in a throwing session to build up his arm strength after four neck procedures in 2011 had forced him to sit out the entire season, he headed to a nearby field with Stokley. When they found it in use by a lacrosse team, they switched to Plan B, a community park with a square, 40-yard field. As passers-by approached during the workout, Stokley would yell, "Jogger!" or "Cyclist!" and he and Manning would hide the football until the person passed.

That afternoon Manning had another appointment scheduled—with Redskins coach Mike Shanahan and his son Kyle, Washington's offensive coordinator. Though it made little sense after the Rams deal, the Shanahans wanted to keep the date, and Manning did. They discussed football for three hours at Shanahan's expansive



house in Denver. Talk about strange connections. Shanahan had been Elway's coach for those two Super Bowls and was fired by the Broncos after the 2008 season. Now Elway ran the Broncos. As Shanahan talked with Manning, a text message popped up on the coach's phone. It was from Elway. "Hey, Mike, put in a good word for us with Peyton." All Shanahan could do was laugh.

One more surprise: Manning got a call informing him that Seahawks coach Pete Carroll had flown, unannounced, with Seattle GM John



Schneider to the airport in Englewood. Carroll would do whatever Manning wanted—talk for a while in Denver or on the plane to Arizona, his next visit, or fly him to Seattle for a lengthier discussion.

Peyton Manning does not like surprises. He said no thanks. Carroll flew home.

When Manning flew to Phoenix on Saturday night to meet with the Cardinals, his every move was again being tracked. Knowing now that he could be tailed wherever he went, Manning thought of a way to confuse his media pursuers. Where can I fly where there's no chance I'll play next year and where nobody will figure I'd go to meet a team? he wondered. And it occurred to him: Indianapolis! He told the Dolphins to meet him on Monday at the Indianapolis airport. In peace.

THE WORK WEEK MARCH 12-16

Manning was getting into a groove throwing. During the session with Stokley in Denver he'd made 65 hard throws. On Monday in Indianapolis he had a lighter workout, with 40 passes. By Tuesday he was in Durham, N.C., where he could throw under the eye of David Cutcliffe, who'd been his coordinator in college and is now the coach at Duke. That night 49ers coach Jim Harbaugh and offensive coordinator Greg Roman came to see Manning throw on a lighted field at Duke. First they watched from a car by the side of the field, then, to get a better view, they came onto the field, hoodies pulled over their heads so as not to be recognized by some nosy iPhoner. Manning texted his mother, Olivia: "You'll never guess who I just worked out for. He was wearing a hoodie."

"Bill Belichick?" she responded.

Good one! Nope, Jim Harbaugh.

On Wednesday, Manning flew from North Carolina to Nashville and spent six hours with the Titans' coaches; no throwing that day. On Thursday, back in Durham, 95 more throws with Cutcliffe. Broncos staff came to watch Friday's 55-pass workout. How did he look? "With Peyton, his release time is important, and that's right on target now," said Cutcliffe. "His velocity is right on. His arm slot is right on. His accuracy's amazing. Obviously I'm close to him, but I've watched



POCKET CHANGE

Despite playing all of his professional home games under the roof at Lucas Oil Stadium, Manning acclimated seamlessly to the conditions in Denver, where the average temperature at kickoff, he was assured, was a surprisingly balmy 60.1°.

him throw for almost 20 years now, and I'm really excited about what I think is going to happen. He's going to be great when he needs to be great."

But for whom? It was getting down to decision time. "These are not math problems," Cutcliffe told Manning. "They don't have single right answers." And he reminded Manning of a credo from their days at Tennessee in the 1990s. "Remember the Patton principle," he told Manning as they drove to the airport for Peyton's trip to Tennessee, where he would work out on Saturday for the Titans. "Yep," Peyton said, recalling Cutcliffe's George S. Patton lesson from college: "Make a decision and do it like hell."

THE HOMESTRETCH MARCH 17-19

To say John Fox was nervous would be an understatement. On the morning of March 17 he texted "Happy Anniversary" to both Peyton and Ashley, who were celebrating their 11th. How did he have Ashley Manning's cell number? "Top secret," Fox said. "I recruited for 10 years in college. I was pretty good."

Manning had told the Titans to meet him at the University of Tennessee football facility in Knoxville on Saturday morning. As Manning drove to the grounds, he saw reporters and camera crews and called Titans coach Mike Munchak, who was driving east on I-40 from Nashville. "The facility's packed with media," Manning said.

"I didn't tell anyone!" Munchak replied.

"Don't worry," said Manning. "Just keep driving, and when you get close, call me, and I'll tell you where to go."

Roger Frazier, Manning's old equipment manager with the Vols, found a field at the private Webb School in Knoxville. Manning called Munchak and told him that when he got off the highway at the appointed exit, he should look for a black car at the end of the ramp and follow it. Munchak did. After a few blocks they pulled up behind another car—Manning's. No media in sight. Manning led them to the field. Though it was raining and water was pooling in one spot, Manning said, "I'm fine." Undisturbed, he threw 55 passes. Then they all went for cheeseburgers.

Afterward, Manning headed for his family's cabin in Chattanooga. He spent part of the weekend calling people he trusted, then interrupted Fox's dinner on Saturday night





Cutcliffe reminded Manning of a Patton credo they followed at Tennessee: “Make a decision and do it like hell.”

by phone with some questions, the tenor of which neither will disclose. “Whatever you decide,” Fox told him, “and I hope it’s us obviously, we’re fine. We appreciate being part of the process.”

Manning talked to another confidant, Bill Parcells, who he knew wouldn’t b.s. him. He told Parcells his arm wasn’t 100% yet. “You know who Jamie Moyer is?” Parcells asked, referring to the veteran lefthander who’s been pitching in the majors since 1986. Manning said he did.

“He’s 49 years old,” Parcells said. “He’s not 26 anymore, but he’s still getting ’em out. Can you still throw well enough to get ’em out?”

“I think I can,” Manning said.

“Then don’t worry about it.”

Manning, of course, wins as much with his head as with his arm. If his arm makes him short with a few balls, he should be able to make up for it with his intelligence—checking down, fooling the defense. Manning could play a game right now, but he wants his arm to get stronger before he has to make throws that count. His doctors have told him his strength should improve.

On Saturday night Manning called Dungy to discuss the pros and cons of the three finalists: Denver, Arizona, Tennessee. Then he asked, “Are there any other things I should be thinking about?”

Said Dungy, “I told him it’s never going to be 100%. He had so many good choices, it’s going to be 51–49, or maybe 50–50, and then it just comes down to a gut feeling. I told him what [Hall of Fame coach] Chuck Noll

told me a long time ago: When you’re making an important life decision, make sure it’s without regard to money, title or position. Make sure it’s about who you’re going to be working with and how much you’ll enjoy being there.”

Dungy could sense that Manning was leaning toward Denver. “He felt good about Elway, about Mr. Bowlen, about Fox, about the offensive coordinator,” Dungy said. “And I think he just wanted confirmation that he wasn’t making a mistake.”

Look at the teams that fell short, and you see familiar faces. Manning’s dad, Archie, played with Munchak late in his career in Houston. Cardinals coach Ken Whisenhunt is a golf buddy of Manning’s and once coached Peyton at the Pro Bowl. Harbaugh preceded Manning as quarterback in Indianapolis. The point men for all were former players.

Look at the teams that wanted in but were cut out. Kansas City: Manning knows GM Scott Pioli but isn’t close to anyone there. Seattle: no strong relationships. The Jets and Miami: ditto. Washington was a little different because Manning knows and respects Mike Shanahan, but the draft deal with the Rams ended that.

On Sunday, Manning knew he was choosing Denver. On Monday he made the phone calls. “I wish I hadn’t gotten so close to Munch,” Manning said. “That was a tough call. Same with Jim Harbaugh.” When he called Elway to tell him the good news, Elway and Fox were discussing whether to make one final push for Manning. Elway answered the phone and gave Fox a thumbs-up. “I almost pulled both hamstrings,” Fox said.

On Tuesday, Manning met the press at the Broncos’ facility in Englewood and held up his new orange number 18 jersey. When he finished almost three hours later, he walked down the stairs and into the locker room, put on Broncos shorts and a Broncos T-shirt and began working out. He followed that routine for the next three days.

Now it was Sunday night, in Palm Beach, Fla., at the league meetings, and Elway was trying to process it all. He’d just pulled off his biggest win since his last game in a Denver uniform, the Super Bowl XXXIII victory over the Falcons. Why did Manning pick Denver?

“I really don’t know,” Elway said. “I never asked him. I never asked him who was in it or where we ranked. I just know if I was in his shoes, I’d know how I’d want to be treated. And that’s how I tried to treat Peyton.”

It worked. □

What's In A Name

After four neck surgeries in two years, Manning wasn't sure if he'd play again. But then came a career renaissance in the Mile High City, and—to the delight of his many namesakes—a record-breaking season made him SI's Sportsman of the Year in 2013

→ **By Lee Jenkins** | Special reporting by Emily Kaplan

Photograph by
Robert Beck
For Sports Illustrated

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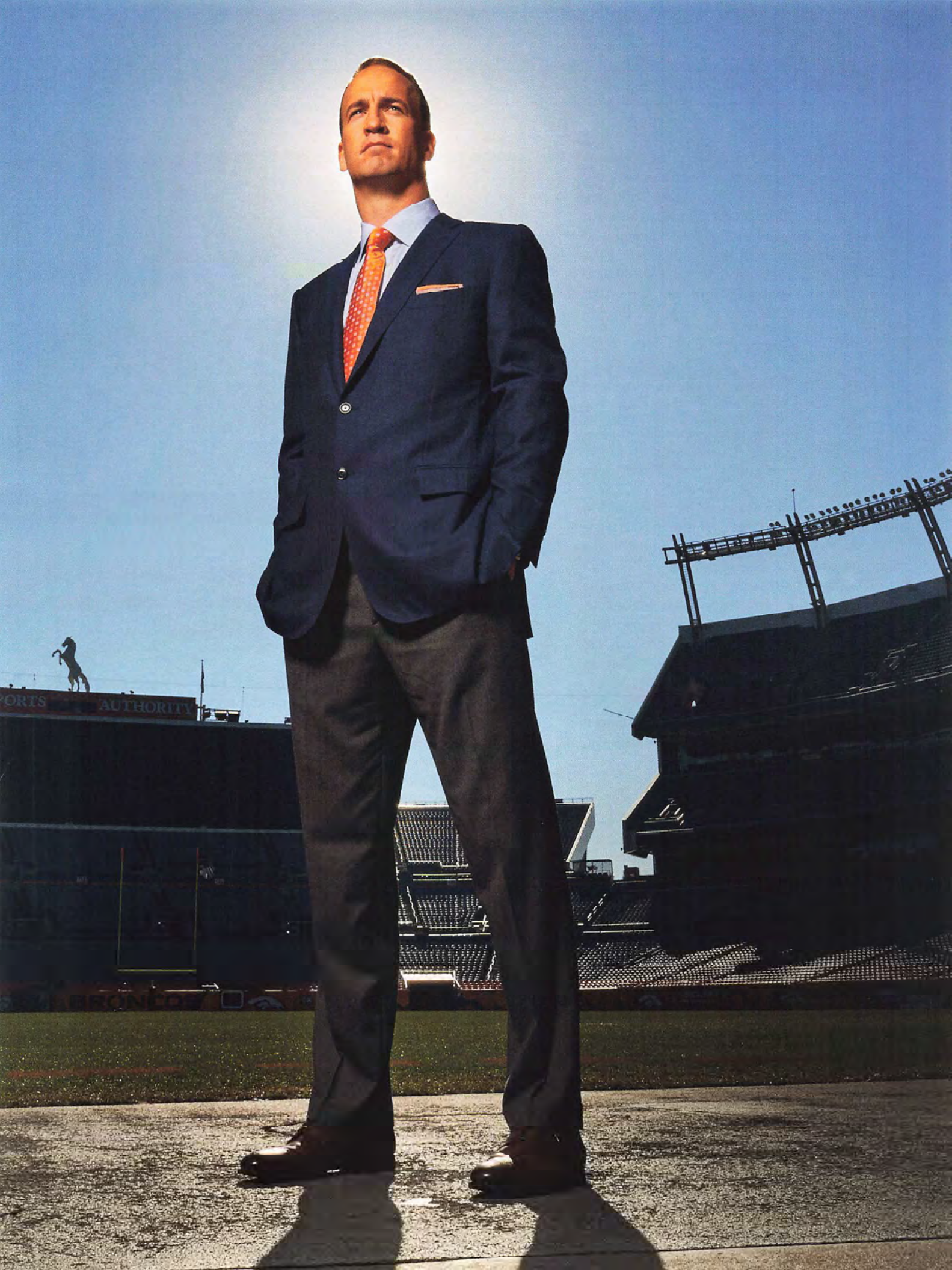
ALL THE apple-checked babies, captured for eternity in Creamsicle onesies three sizes too big, are nearly grown. They are high school valedictorians and college athletes, Eagle Scouts and black belts, yearbook editors and engineering majors. They are in the National Honor Society. They lead Bible study. They raise money for cancer research. They lifeguard in the summer. They work part-time at Cracker Barrel. One directs short films. One blew the trumpet in a high school band at President Barack Obama's

second inaugural parade. One earned a marketing award for helping develop a project to sell reusable popcorn containers at football games. One is a linebacker and a defensive end recruited by half the SEC, one is a three handicap, one runs a 5K in 18:20 and one hit an unforgettable grand slam in the ninth. One became the first girl in an all-male wrestling club, as well as the first deaf member of that club. She then captured the state championship in her weight class. Most hail from Tennessee, but you can find them as far away as lacrosse fields on Long Island. They don't have much in common—besides, of course, their first name.

It is an unusual name, or at least it used to be. According to the Social Security Administration, which started tracking the popularity of names in 1960, Peyton had never cracked the top 100 in Tennessee. But in 1994 the state's flagship university welcomed a freshman quarterback from

A LONG SHADOW

SI's 2013 Sportsman of the Year not only came back from a devastating injury to dominate the league but also took time to encourage others dealing with similar afflictions.





New Orleans named after his Uncle Peyton, a Mississippi farmer who grew cotton and soybeans, raised cattle and loved sports. A year after Peyton Manning enrolled, he directed Tennessee to its first win against Alabama in 10 years, and roughly 10 months after that, Southern hospitals noted the first outbreak of Peytons. Call them Bama Boomers. "It was an epidemic," says Manning's older brother, Cooper, who was forced to quit football

NAME, SET, MATCH

Peyton used to be an unusual name, but thanks to the on-field heroics of number 18, it's exploded in popularity since the mid-90s—especially in Tennessee.

at Ole Miss because of a spinal injury. From 1996 through '98 a total of 68 Peytons were born at the University of Tennessee Medical Center alone, compared with 10 the decade before. By 1997, according to babynames.com, Peyton was the 51st-most-popular newborn boy name in the state.

Families showed up at Volunteers practices, orange-clad infants in tow, and thrust them into Manning's reluctant arms for photos. "What am I supposed to say?" he asked his father, Archie, the iconic Ole Miss quarterback. "I don't know," his dad replied. "I only had dogs and cats named after me." Though Uncle Peyton died a bachelor, his name will live forever.

FOR TWO DECADES Peyton Manning has methodically elevated the standards of everybody from NFL quarterbacks to video-room interns to offspring named in his honor—one film session, one spiral notebook, one dummy audible at a time. The mother of an eighth-grade classmate once told Manning's mom, Olivia, "Peyton really has to study for his A's. My child just goes in and takes the test." The remark, while rude, was revealing. Manning always did the work. He is still the striver who scored a modest 1030 on his SAT yet graduated with the highest GPA that year in Tennessee's College of Communication and Information.

Chosen by Indianapolis, Manning turned the quarterbacks meeting room into his personal office. He installed a film projector with a Beta dock in the basement of his house. He watched every practice. On Saturdays after walk-through, he cleared the equipment room and shut the door



Manning has elevated the standards of everybody from video-room interns to offspring named in his honor.

so he could select his 12 game balls in peace. First, he washed his hands. Then he hurled one ball after another at the equipment manager, barking "game" if it made the cut, "pregame" if it didn't. "Why can't the seams be perfect?" he asked. He'd have sewn them himself if he could.

The laser rocket arm—as it was described in Manning's famous Sprint commercial—is more like a cap gun now. Yet in 2013 he piloted the best team in the AFC and the most bountiful offense in the NFL while threatening single-season passing records for yards and touchdowns. Still, that's not why Manning is Sportsman of the Year for 2013. To explain the choice, we defer to Peyton Robinette's valedictorian speech, delivered at the Rockwood High School gymnasium outside Knoxville in June. "I urge you all to always remember the experiences you've had," said Robinette, a biology major with a black belt in taekwondo who is attending Tennessee on the prestigious Volunteer Scholarship, to his fellow graduates. "But be ready to write your sequel. Be prepared to face consequences. Be prepared for adversity. Be prepared for change."

Manning was the No. 1 recruit in the country and the No. 1 pick in the draft. In 23 years of organized football, Manning missed one snap. Sure, he was laid bare a few times in Gainesville and Foxboro, and he occasionally told family members it would be easier to go 9-7 and just miss the playoffs than risk more January heartbreak. But compared with the beaten and concussed, he was beyond privileged. He had 13-3 on autopilot, along with 4,000 yards and 30 touchdowns, a first-round bye and home field throughout. His career was fantasy football.

Then he woke up. It was Sept. 11, 2011, and he was lying in a hotel bed in Marina del Rey, Calif. He had just undergone his fourth neck operation in two years, to remove a herniated disk from his spinal cord that all but killed the nerve running down his fabled right arm. The Colts



Peyton Dukes
Hometown:
Knoxville, Tenn.



Peyton Lara
Hometown:
Knoxville, Tenn.



Peyton Robinette
Hometown:
Rockwood, Tenn.



Peyton Williams
Hometown:
Lewisburg, Tenn.

were playing the Texans, starting somebody else at quarterback for the first time in 13 years. They lost 34–7. Nothing was perfect anymore. “It was hard to watch,” Manning recalls. “I was disappointed, I was down, because I wasn’t able to do what I love and I didn’t know where I was headed. I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to perform again.” The nerve was so ravaged in the summer of ’11 that he couldn’t push himself out of bed. He couldn’t lift a three-pound dumbbell.

Manning went to his family’s annual passing academy in southern Louisiana, but he barely picked up a ball. “Why can’t you throw me one pass?” a crestfallen high school receiver asked. “I just can’t,” Manning muttered. “Eli will throw you one.” He wouldn’t even throw when only maintenance workers were around. He couldn’t stand the thought of anybody witnessing his wounded ducks. “He’s not very good at disguising how he feels,” Cooper says. “I saw him vulnerable for the first time. And then I saw him get emotionally around the idea that, Hey, this may be too much to battle back from.” The fourth surgery was fourth down.

He was shockingly at peace. “Who am I to complain?” Manning asked himself. “Who am I to say, Why is this happening to me? I had 20 years of unbelievable luck. All these other players had careers cut short. Cooper didn’t even get to start his career.” Peyton’s wife, Ashley, had just given birth to their first children, twins Marshall and Mosley. Home movies suddenly seemed more appealing than Patriots tape. “I’ve studied enough for a couple of careers,” Manning says. “My brain could use a little rest.” Ashley, who has been with Manning since they were in college but has stayed far from public view, was the one to offer the gentle nudge he needed. “You’ve got to try,” she said.

So began a sequel that would make Peyton Robinette proud.

A **GRAY SUV** rolls across suburban Denver, through the shadow of the Flatirons, past the aspen trees and alfalfa farms. The best quarterback in the world, yet again, sits in the backseat. He is wearing a half-zip beige sweater over a white, button-down shirt, fresh off an appearance at the Alexander Dawson School in Lafayette, where a kindergartner raised his hand during an all-school assembly and asked Manning how he plays football.

“I try to throw the ball really quickly,” Manning responded, in his distinctive country Cajun mash-up, “before those big, ugly defensive linemen come tackle me.” There it is, kids, the elementary version of how a 37-year-old who couldn’t uncork a 10-yard out in 2011 and was cut in ’12 now directs the NFL’s most prolific offense while leading the league in almost every meaningful passing category. He tossed touchdowns in 37 straight games. He outgained 19 whole teams. According to Broncos quarterbacks coach Greg Knapp, he forced one throw in the first half of the season.

Manning lacks the arm strength he had in his prime. He still can’t run. His upper body is so lean that six months ago he texted Broncos trainers a beefcake shot from his college days with the message, “At one point I did look good.”



The mind, which enables the rapid-fire release, is the only part that hasn't lost power.

When Manning was a rookie, the Colts installed a no-huddle package called Lightning, which they deployed when they trailed. One day, around 2000, Moore asked Manning, "Why are we waiting to be down 10-0? Why don't we start in Lightning?" That question changed football. At first, Moore would call two plays from the sideline and let Manning pick one. Then Moore gave Manning four plays and let him switch from runs to passes. Finally he let him call entire games. "It's always been a cerebral position, but Peyton made it more cerebral," says former Broncos quarterback and current executive vice president John Elway. "He was the first one to get in the hurry-up, figure out the coverage at the line, find the right play against the coverage and call everything himself. He really started the no-huddle. Now everybody does it." From Pop Warner on, quarterbacks are asked to think faster because Manning showed what was possible.

The injury made him a different quarterback. Manning relies more on his legs to generate velocity, like a pitcher pushing off the rubber, and focuses more on his footwork, an area Knapp believes he let lapse. Manning can no longer fling post patterns between two safeties. He must be precise with his delivery. "To quote Hank Stram," Manning says, "I matriculate down the field."

The injury also made him a different person. He used to fidget when people told him they were praying for him. "I'm fine," he'd say. "You don't have to do that." Now he thanks them for their prayers. He lets his backup, Brock Osweiler, take some of his snaps in practice. Manning is often portrayed as a signal-calling automaton, jogging robotically to the sideline while teammates celebrate touchdowns, but he has turned sentimental. He tears up at movies he's seen before.

Recently, he sold his house in Indianapolis, and Ashley flew back for the closing. She walked the halls narrating a video shot with her phone. In the basement she said, "Here's where Peyton spent a lot of nights helping the Colts win a lot of games." He chokes on the words as he repeats them.

He never thought he would leave that place.

THE FOURTH SURGERY, a single-level anterior fusion, immediately alleviated the pain but did not regenerate the nerve. "People with nerve injuries told me, 'You could wake up tomorrow and be fine,'" Manning says. "It was encouraging,



but it left you pretty disappointed every day." He tried to view his rehab as a game, which didn't work, because he never knew how much time was on the clock. Colts trainers, accustomed to an indestructible quarterback, hid their concern. "He couldn't throw a ball," says then strength coach Jon Torine. "I was scared for him, scared for everything."

Manning flew to Durham, N.C., in November 2011 and moved in with Duke coach David Cutcliffe, his offensive coordinator at Tennessee. "I'd never seen him throw in person where it wasn't perfection," Cutcliffe says. "He was so out of whack, I had to ask him to quit throwing. He was on the way to hurting himself. We're all products of what our nerves allow us to do. He had to rebuild his mechanics from the ground up. He had to relearn everything." They worked in the Blue Devils' locker room, watching old Indy tapes, Manning trying to impersonate Manning. "When I was on, I was shocked when the ball didn't go exactly where I wanted," Manning says. "It got to the point where I was shocked when it did go where I wanted."

Manning stayed at Duke, on and off, for more than three months, and the nerve started firing again. He invited several former Indianapolis teammates—center Jeff Saturday, tight end Dallas Clark, receivers Brandon Stokley and Austin Collie—and on March 3, 2012, they simulated every detail of the 2010 AFC championship game against the Jets. "It was a little over the top," says Stokley, recounting the Gatorade breaks on the sideline when the invisible Colts defense was on the field. "But that's how he operates."

Four days later the Colts—who had the first pick in the draft and were eyeing Stanford quarterback Andrew Luck—cut him. "I think it broke his heart," Archie says. "I think he understood the reality [was], It's time for me to go. And then I think he reconsidered and said, 'No, I'm supposed to play my whole career here.' So he went back and told them, 'I'll help Andrew, and we'll make it work. I want to stay.'" The Colts, however, had already moved on. Manning could not have been more gracious in the tearful press conference that followed, referring to owner Jim Irsay as "my friend," but when he arrived at Broncos headquarters the next day for a free-agent visit, Elway saw another side. "He was in shock," Elway says. "He wanted to prove they made the wrong decision. He wouldn't say that, because he's not that type of guy, but that's the message I got. When great competitors get scorned, they come back with a vengeance. We signed a Hall of Famer with a chip on his shoulder."

Manning, ailing since the lockout, had floated from one training staff





“Who am I to complain?” Manning asked himself. “Who am I to say, Why is this happening to me? I had 20 years of unbelievable luck.”

to another. Finally he had a home, with the Broncos. They weren’t as worried about his arm as the rest of his body. “He was really detrained,” says Luke Richesson, Denver’s strength and conditioning coach. “We broke him down like a car—take the motor out, get the alignment straight, then focus on the horsepower.” Manning’s physical therapy continued through the season, but Denver still went 13–3.

“You want to be better because it’s Peyton Manning,” says the Broncos’ leading receiver, Demaryius Thomas. “I know I’m a better player because he’s here.” “That’s the secret of football with Peyton Manning,” adds tight end Jacob Tamme. “How much he demands of himself seeps into everybody else.” They watch him charge onto the field with a knee brace, matching high-ankle sprains and a glove protecting a right hand that still sometimes feels numb. He fights off a limp. The mind is so dominant, it’s easy to miss the heart.

IN THE backseat of the SUV, a stack of letters rests at Manning’s feet: from a mother whose son was injured in a motorcycle accident and is learning to walk again, from a 90-year-old woman who picks college games against her friend but needs a new opponent because her friend just died, from a man who can’t move his neck and doesn’t know what to do. Every professional athlete receives reams of tear-stained letters, but they sound different when Manning reads them now. “I didn’t have a serious illness,” he says. “My life was never in danger. But I feel like I can write to these families, or talk to them, with more of a connection than I had before.”

A son of the genteel South, Manning learned early on the power of the

TALE OF TWO CITIES

Manning and his wife Ashley (far left) handled the emotionally difficult move from Indianapolis to Denver with poise, winning new fans and keeping the old.

handwritten note, unsurpassed by text or tweet. Throughout his career Manning has written coaches and players who retire, as well as widows of coaches and players who pass away. He writes subjects of documentaries he’s seen and victims of tragedies he’s heard about. He writes his children every six months, even though they are years away from deciphering his cursive. Ashley buys his stationery, cream-colored cards with PEYTON W. MANNING in block letters at the top. It’s hard to find any coach, teammate or staffer who hasn’t received a note from Manning. “I got one when my dad passed,” says Stokley, “and another when Peyton stayed at my house.” “I got one when I retired,” says former Colts video director Marty Heckscher. “It almost brought me to tears.” “I got one when the Colts let me go,” says Torine, the former strength coach. “It meant more than any paycheck.”

All the support that Manning sent to others came flooding back in the year he missed: calls from friends such as Fox broadcaster Joe Buck, who nearly lost his voice because of a nerve ailment in his left vocal cord, but also from rivals like Tom Brady and Bill Belichick. “We’ve been playing a long time in the same era, and there aren’t too many people who can relate to what I go through on a daily basis and what he goes through, besides each other,” Brady says. “There’s mutual appreciation.” Manning considered the impact those well-wishers made and was reminded of the influence he could have.

On his first day as a Bronco he sought out staffers Adam Newman and Josh Bruning. “I’m going to need you to help me with my mail,” he said. Every Tuesday, Newman and Bruning read the roughly 300 pieces addressed to Manning in a given week, determining which ones he will want to see. Autograph requests go in one pile. Double-dippers are discarded. Heartfelt letters are marked READ in red pen. The notes that move him or that entertain him, he takes home.

To Charlie Johnson, a 63-year-old in Indiana who is nervous about neck-fusion surgery: “My neck pain went away immediately after my surgery. I believe you will be able to resume your normal activities rather quickly. I took it slow



on doctors' orders, but I felt better right away. Good luck and health."

To Jack Benson, an eight-year-old in California with cancer: "I just wanted you to know that you are in my thoughts and prayers. Your cousin, Skip Hanke, wrote to me and told me of the tough fight you are having. You have a lot of people pulling for you. I am glad to know you are a Bronco fan!"

To Clint Taylor, a high school quarterback in Texas who broke his leg: "I just wanted to encourage you to keep working hard and keep the faith. I have read your blog and I can tell you that your positive attitude and your strong work ethic will take you a long way. Keep it up."

To Chris Harris, widow of David Harris, a pastor in Arkansas who was killed in a car accident along with his granddaughter Maci: "I am sorry for your loss. Please know that you are in my thoughts and prayers. 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' (Matthew 5:4). I learned that Pastor Harris was an avid Colts fan and had an autographed picture of me in his office. I read an article about Pastor Harris, and I can tell he was very special. Maci sounded very special as well. I am proud that he was a fan of mine. May God's peace be with you."

Manning keeps a list of those he has contacted, with descriptions of the correspondence on the back of the envelopes. "Letter from a woman whose best friend had cancer and is a big fan. . . . Husband has MS and they are naming their first born Peyton. . . . Sick man. Call ASAP." Sometimes, instead of a note, he picks up the phone on the 25-minute drive home after practice. "I cold-call them," he says. "I block my number, and they don't answer, so then you have to call back at night. They think it's a prank call, but after that, you just take a moment and listen."

IT IS an overcast Friday morning in Indianapolis, the Colts beat the Titans the night before in Nashville, and the equipment managers are spinning 30 loads of laundry on three hours' sleep. "It doesn't smell as bad when you win," says Jon Scott, who has been scrubbing grass stains since the team's Baltimore days. He met Manning in 1998, when the hotshot prospect visited the Colts' headquarters. On the way out, Manning said, "Hey, Jon, it was nice to meet you." The Mannings may be American royalty, but they relate best to workers.

Outside of Manning's family, support staffers might know him better than anybody. The Colts' equipment managers—Scott, Brian Seabrooks



"When competitors get scorned, they come back with a vengeance," says Elway. "We signed a Hall of Famer with a chip on his shoulder."

and Sean (Frog) Sullivan—caught more of Manning's passes than Reggie Wayne or Marvin Harrison. They reviewed the rough cuts of his commercials. They ate with him late at night in the facility when everyone else was gone. After Manning got tripped up in a game against the Texans one year, costing the Colts a touchdown, he asked Sullivan and Seabrooks to lie on the practice field the next day and try to trip him again. Manning once let Seabrooks watch film with him. "He ran the same play back and forth for 30 minutes," Seabrooks recalls. "By the time he got to the end of it, I was asleep. I never found out if it was a run or a pass."

"He's your everyday, sit-down, have-a-cold-beer kind of guy who just happens to be the best quarterback in the past 25 years," says Sullivan.

Manning barred his beloved equipment guys from the goodbye press conference, for fear he'd break down even faster than he did. But when it was over, he requested that they drive him to the airport, Sullivan behind the wheel of a Toyota Sequoia, Seabrooks riding shotgun, Scott and Manning in the backseat. "There were a lot of tears," Scott says. "I gave him a handwritten note because that's what he gives everybody else. He thought it was a joke. I just wrote the record of my first 15 years with the Colts and my record after he came." Without Manning there might not even be an NFL team in Indianapolis, and there would certainly be no Lucas Oil Stadium and no downtown renaissance.

Given the angry politics of modern sports, it is nearly impossible for an iconic athlete to remain on good terms with a city left behind. But Manning has accomplished what Brett Favre could not. After signing with Denver he called Vince Caponi, executive chairman of the board for St. Vincent Health, which oversees 22 hospitals in Indiana, including the Peyton Manning Children's Hospital in Indianapolis. People were asking Caponi if he'd rename it after Luck. "I want you to know I'm committed to St. Vincent," Manning said. "That won't waver." His Payback Foundation still hands out 800 bags of groceries in Indy for Thanksgiving, as well as 800 in Denver.

When Manning started the foundation, in 1999, he was advised to address one specific area of need. "But I like to say yes more than I say no," he ex-



MADE TO BE BROKEN

In Denver, Manning topped Brady's single-season touchdown record in 2013 (near left) with 55; two seasons later he would set a new mark for career passing yards: 71,940.

Contrast that image with the scene in the visiting locker room at Sports Authority Field after the Broncos' 38–35 playoff loss to the Ravens in double overtime. Manning, coping with another round of January heartbreak, waited to congratulate retiring linebacker Ray Lewis. He held little Marshall's hand, setting the example that his dad set for him.

P EYTON WILLIAMS hobbles through the front door of his grandfather's house in Lewisburg, Tenn., a town of 10,000 along the Duck River in the middle of the state. The leaves, Volunteer orange, have fallen from the sugar-maple trees. Williams enrolled in the Cornersville Youth Football League when he was seven, and two years ago he played at Chase Field in Phoenix as an eighth-grade All-America. He is 6 feet and 211 pounds, and he squats 425. Only a sophomore, Williams has received letters from Tennessee, Nebraska, Florida State, Mississippi State, Arkansas, USC, North Carolina and Louisville. His dream is to play linebacker or defensive end in the SEC. But in his team's regular-season finale, against Giles County, his left ACL gave out.

Roger Williams works at the GM plant in Spring Hill. Sixteen years ago he named his son after Peyton Williams Manning. By then the name was common around here; Marshall County has three Peytons on the roster. Peyton Williams is a Tennessee fan, down to his orange sneakers. But he is not as zealous as his dad. He doesn't study his namesake every Sunday. And yet he is a Peyton, which means he is inextricably linked. In a week he will undergo surgery, followed by months of painstaking physical therapy, followed by inevitable anxiety and doubt. Sitting at the head of his grandfather's dining room table, he eyes the bulky brace on his left knee and wipes the brown bangs from his forehead. Like most teenage boys, he doesn't speak much, but the words carry weight. "When you think that Peyton Manning wasn't able to throw a 10-yard pass, you realize that he really could have quit," Williams says. "It's on you to do the therapy. It's on you to do the work. You decide how you turn out." □

plains. Payback has awarded \$5.5 million in grants to nonprofit organizations benefiting underprivileged children in Louisiana, Tennessee, Indiana and, now, Colorado. Most of the donations are relatively modest, around \$10,000, but they are earmarked for roughly 90 organizations per year. Some want to buy school uniforms. Some want to launch afternoon programs. Some want to build gardens and grow vegetables. Online applications are due on Feb. 1 and are graded by a board. Manning and his wife pick the winners.

Sportsmanship wasn't always his specialty. When Manning was five and his coach-pitch team lost every game by about 20 runs, the coach would invariably tell the boys it was a tie. "He thinks we're stupid," Manning griped to his parents. "It was not a tie." When he was eight and Archie coached his youth basketball team, they sparred because Archie drafted his friends' sons even though many of them couldn't shoot. Archie vowed never to coach him again. When Peyton was 12, he had a new basketball coach with a curious substitution pattern. After one loss the coach told the team, "The reason we didn't win the game is because you weren't ready to play." Manning pointed a finger in his face. "No," he protested, "the reason we didn't win the game is because you don't know what you're doing." Archie drove him to the coach's house that night, in tears, to apologize.





Peyton: Unplugged

What do you ask the QB who's been asked everything? Dig deep and you get Manning's advice to younger players, his thoughts on current events and why he would have made a good free safety

➦ **By Peter King**

Photograph by
John W. McDonough
For Sports Illustrated

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THE CHALLENGE of interviewing Peyton Manning is coming up with something new to ask. He might be the most interviewed athlete of this generation. Over the past few years I've struggled to find something—*anything*—that he hasn't talked about in a while. Or ever. In an August 2014 conversation with him, I was determined to come up with questions that Peyton Manning had never been asked. Alas, I believe only six met that threshold.

But here's what the Broncos' quarterback had to say. . . .

The MMQB: *What's the first organized football game you ever played?*

Manning: I didn't play organized football until I was in the seventh grade. Up until that point I only played at recess and in the backyard. So in seventh grade, I played for my school—Newman School in New Orleans. When you entered practice for the first day, you had to sign up for an offensive position and a defensive position. I signed up for quarterback and free safety. I never got to play free safety. They had enough players back there. Anyway, we won our first game, against St. Martin's, kind of

INSIDE MANNING

Over the better part of two decades in the NFL, Manning answered questions on just about everything—but that didn't stop King (above, left) from asking more.

our rival school. I threw a couple touchdowns and I ran one. We actually ran a little option back in the day. They had trouble reading if you faked the veer to the fullback. Believe it or not, I could get around the end and run a little option. That ended for me pretty much when I left high school. I was number 11 in the seventh grade. I couldn't be 8, my dad's number. Back then they just gave you a jersey. Lucky for me, at least I got a quarterback number.

The MMQB: *What other positions have you played over the years?*

Manning: I'm kind of embarrassed by this. I've never played, on the field, any other position besides quarterback. Never been on a special team. Never been on defense.

The MMQB: *Maybe in your last NFL game you should play another position—just for one snap. Peyton Manning at safety?*

Manning: I always say, 'I'd like to go play safety.' I mean, I would know what the quarterback is doing. The Ed Reed range, though . . . I just don't quite have it.

The MMQB: *If what happened to your brother Cooper—who had to quit football because of spinal stenosis in college—happened to you, what would you have done with your life? Do football from the broadcast booth?*

Manning: That's a good question. Cooper handled it so well, with an unbelievable grace and attitude, and I'm not sure that I could have handled it as well as he did, at that age. I know it was hard. He audibled and went on to become a 'social legend' at Ole Miss, and obviously he's got a great family and is successful in business. But I will say . . . Well, it's different because I got to play for 20 years. But I had my neck injury and was potentially done with football. I felt like I had that same good attitude that Cooper did. Now, it's different. Like I said, I got to play. Cooper never really got his chance. But I guess I had matured since I was in college, and I was able to handle that well. Football's been such a part of my life. It's allowed me to meet so many people and do so many things. At Tennessee, I was a communications major—which I enjoyed. I do enjoy public speaking. But I [only] get asked to speak because I play football. So it's hard to say if I would have tried to stay involved in the game from another point of view—from coaching or something like that. TV, I don't know. I'm not sure how good I'd be at it. I guess I've always liked being on the players' side. Once you cross over, you're on a



"I'm kind of embarrassed by this," Manning says. "I've never played, on the field, any other position besides quarterback."

different side. Obviously I won't be a player forever, but while I am, I'm just trying to enjoy it while I can.

The MMQB: *Do you pay any attention to current events—Syria, the Ebola virus, what's happening in the Gaza Strip?*

Manning: Yeah. I keep up. Believe it or not, in our cafeteria—I wonder how this compares with other teams—we keep it on news channels. We keep it off the sports channels. It's Fox News or CNN. We've usually got one of each to kind of balance it out. [Laughs.] So, yeah, you keep up. When Katrina occurred, that's [my] hometown. [Now] I feel like I can relate more to [events elsewhere] because I've seen my hometown [go through something terrible] before. You might watch a current event and say, 'Ferguson, Missouri—I've never heard of it.' But Montee Ball and Sylvester Williams are from near there. So you do have more of a sympathetic view, and you pay attention. Your thoughts go out to the people affected by it.

The MMQB: *Do you vote?*

Manning: I do. I have voted ever since I've been eligible to vote. I don't do it just to do it. You try to know who you're voting for. I was good friends with the governor of Indiana, Mitch Daniels, who's now the president of Purdue. Probably could have been president of the United States. You try to get to



know them. I've gotten to know some of the folks here in Colorado. There's some different laws out here in Colorado. Pizza business is pretty good out here, believe it or not, due to some recent law changes. So when you come to a different place, you've kind of got to learn everything that comes with it.

The MMQB: *Is it a great day when you can go out in public and no one recognizes you?*

Manning: I try to enjoy both sides of it. If you're really dreading something then, to me, that's not having a good attitude about it. I realize that it won't last forever. When you stop playing, there's probably still some of that light, but it's not the same. There's a certain hat that you wear when you play quarterback. If you can make an impact when you're wearing the hat, I enjoy doing that. At the same time, I certainly enjoy the quiet moments, when it's just my family or... I saw my high school tight end [recently]. He was also our catcher in baseball. He lives out in San Francisco—a guy named Mike Keck. He and I got to visit for 30 minutes after the 49ers game [in the preseason]. We kind of got in a corner. There was nobody

else around. He said, 'Man, it's so nice to just be able to talk to you without anything else.' I even said the same thing. We were talking high school stories. So I enjoy those moments certainly. At the same time, after that, I went and signed some autographs for the fans. I still enjoy doing that part of it. So I try to have a good attitude in either of the situations that I'm in.

The MMQB: *What's the best round of golf in your life?*

Manning: I shot even par, 72, at St. Andrews. Me, Cooper, Eli and my dad went three summers ago. But we were playing from the 'up' tees—because they make you. Everybody wants to play where the pros do. But then they'd be six-hour rounds. So they say, 'Hey, this is where you're playing.' It's probably 6,400 yards. Not a long course at all. I like to say that even if I was all the way

MAN OF MANNING TALENTS

The QB has cultivated plenty of interests beyond football, including golf (at Pebble Beach in 2014, left) and rubbing elbows with political figures like former Indiana governor Mitch Daniels (below, left).



back there, I had it dialed in that day. So it was fun. Obviously that's my favorite golf foursome of all time.

The MMQB: *Say you had every rookie quarterback in the league sitting in front of you right now and you could give them a message to try to help them as they begin their careers. What would it be?*

Manning: I think about the advice that I got when I was a rookie and what really stuck with me. There's a couple of things. When we played the 49ers [in 1998] out in San Francisco, Steve Young came up to me after the game, put his arm around me and said, 'Peyton, just trust me. The game will eventually slow down for you. It will slow down.'

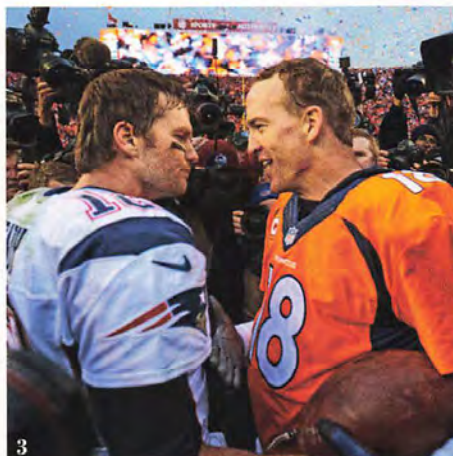
It's funny, because it was kind of this weight off my shoulders. I had been thinking, It's just not the same as college. It's so different. Of course, I was like, Please hurry up and slow down. Please hurry up and slow down. But boy, he was right. Even toward the end of that season, I started to see some things a lot slower. Then the next season, we went from 3-13 to 13-3. Each game in years two and three, it did slow down, just as Steve said it would. So just trusting the process—it is a marathon and not a sprint.

If I could give them a couple pieces of advice, I would start with this: 'Don't ever go to a meeting to watch a practice or a game without having already watched it by yourself.' That's one thing that I have always done. When the coach is controlling the remote control, he's going to rewind when he wants to rewind. He's going to skip certain plays. He's not watching every single detail. When you can control the rewind button, you can go in there and you watch—first, you better watch your mechanics. Watch what you're doing. Is your drop good? How's your throw? O.K., now rewind it again. Now you better watch your receivers. O.K., looks like Demaryius Thomas ran a good route here. Not sure what Julius Thomas was doing here. Then you better rewind it again and watch what the defense is doing. When I go in and watch it with the coach, I'm watching it for the third, fourth, fifth time. That's when you start learning.

The other thing I would tell them: 'To watch film without a pen and paper in your hand is a complete waste of time.' You do it that way, you're only watching it to please the coach. If you're in the QB room, and you leave the door open so they can see you in there, don't. Shut the door. Whether they know you're in there or not, they're going to know by the way you play out on the field. Don't go showing off.

So those are some things that I have been doing for a long time that have helped me. I pull for quarterbacks. I do. These young guys that are playing—I still like the ones that get to play early. I still think that's the best way to learn. I still hold that rookie record for interceptions. As much as I'm pulling for them to be successful, I'm not gonna lie—I pull for these rookies every year to break it. I do not like holding that record. So, whoever wants to start their rookie quarterback 16 times and throw it a lot, I'm all for it. □



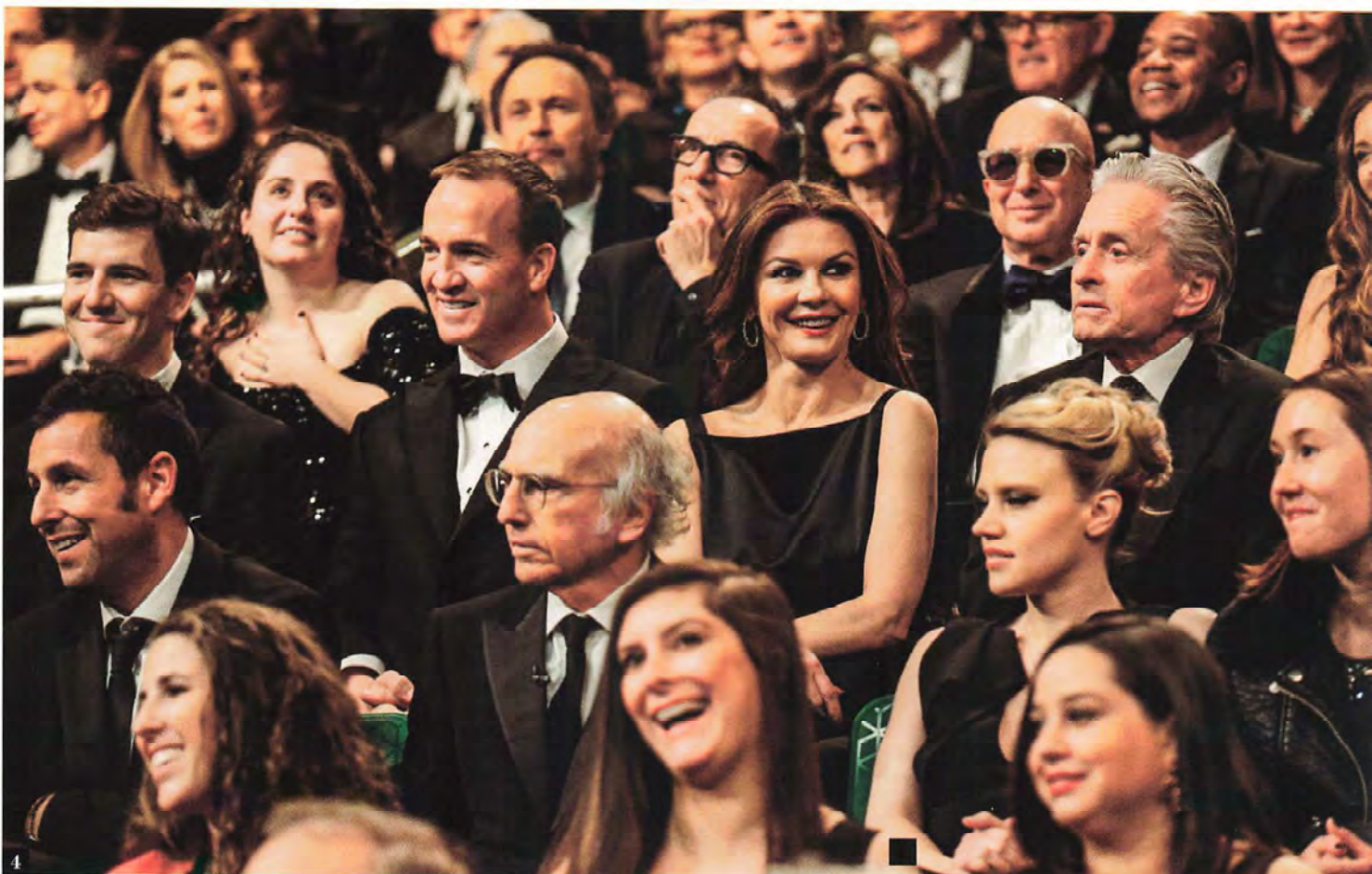


THE BRONCOS YEARS

1. Letting one fly during the Super Bowl 50 victory over the Panthers.
2. With Dan Marino and Kevin Durant at the 2014 ESPY awards show.
3. A final handshake with longtime rival Tom Brady, after the 2016 AFC championship game.
4. With his son, Marshall, at training camp in 2014.
5. Posing with fellow only-one-name-needed stars Derek, Mia and Michael in 2015.



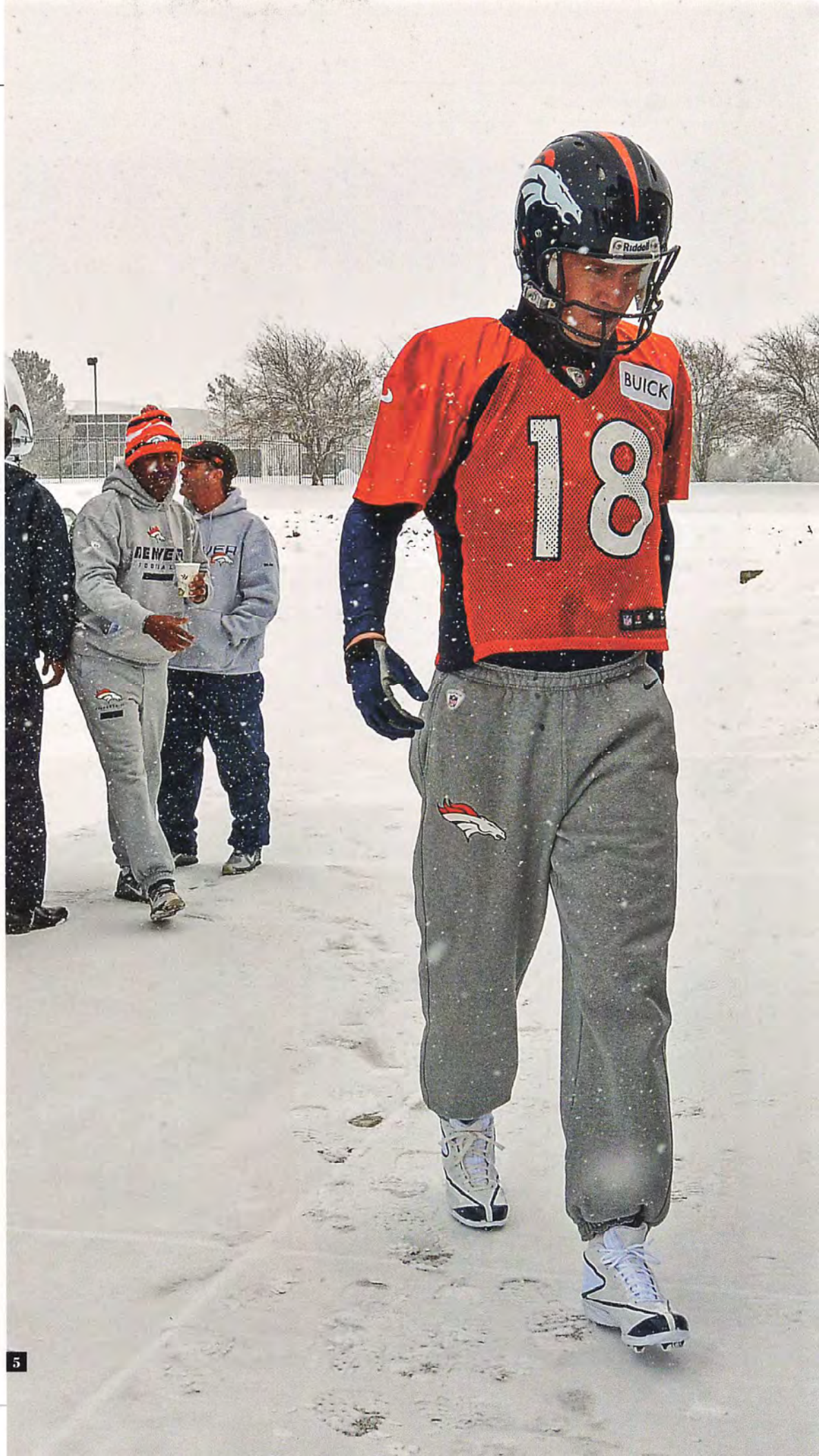
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THE BRONCOS YEARS

1. With then coach John Fox before Super Bowl XLVIII.
2. Beating the Raiders on Oct. 11, 2015, a win that made Manning the second-oldest quarterback to start a season 5-0.
3. Heading into the tunnel at Mile High after defeating the Packers on Nov. 1, 2015, his 186th regular-season win.
4. Enjoying a prime seat at the *Saturday Night Live* 40th Anniversary special in February 2015.
5. A snowy practice in Englewood, Colo., during his record-breaking 2013 season.

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CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP



THE BRONCOS YEARS

After beating the Patriots in the AFC championship game on Jan. 19, 2014, Manning stood under a shower of confetti as he prepared to make his third Super Bowl appearance.



Front Runner

Peyton Manning has appeared on SI's cover
→ 17 times, from an homage to his dad in 1996
to a 2016 showdown with an archrival



August 26, 1996



September 22, 1997



November 22, 1999



December 22, 2003



December 20, 2004



July 25, 2005



November 7, 2005



January 29, 2007



February 12, 2007



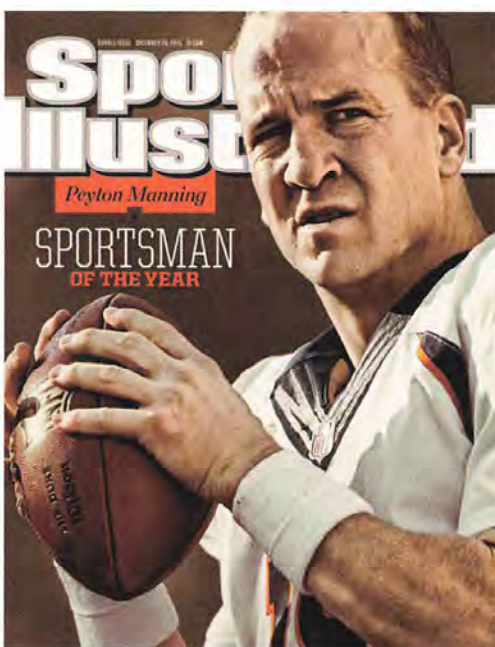
September 3, 2007



November 16, 2009



September 17, 2012



December 23, 2013



August 12, 2013



January 27, 2014



February 10, 2014



January 25, 2016

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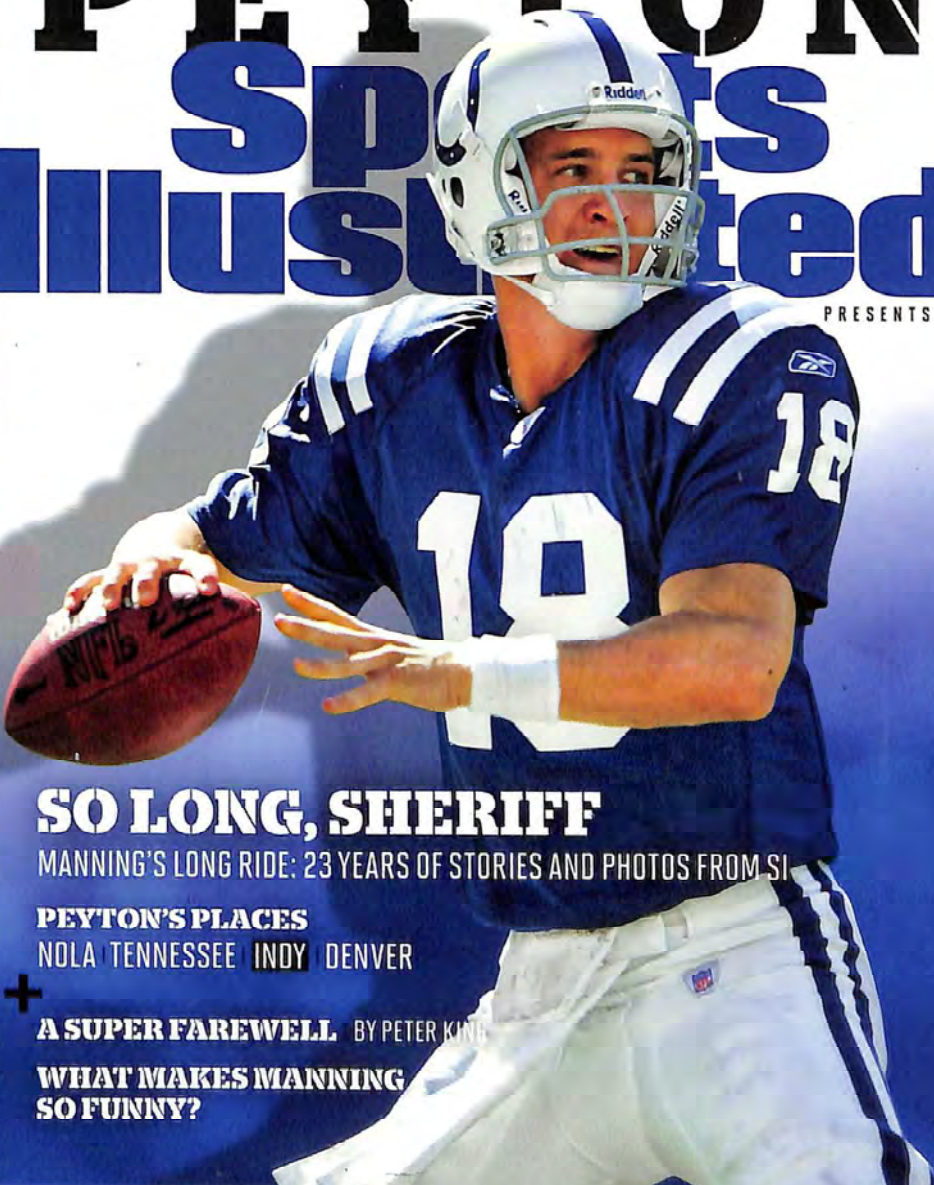
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